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*Gen. Downey, Edmund.* 1

# A HOUSE OF TEARS

BY

EDMUND DOWNEY,

AUTHOR OF "IN ONE TOWN," ETC., ETC.

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# A HOUSE OF TEARS.

## CHAPTER I.

TWELVE years ago I bought a practice and rented a house in a London suburb. I was then in my thirtieth year : consequently I am now forty-two. Most men, especially men of my profession, are young at thirty years of age, but I was never a young man. At forty-two, not a very advanced age, I am quite an old man. My face is haggard and my hair is gray.

I cannot now explain how it came to pass that I selected medicine as a profession. I had little taste for the practical portion of my studies : unsightly objects always created an almost overwhelming sense of disgust within me. I fainted at my first entry into a dissecting chamber. Still, the theoretical portion of my studies had, even in the beginning, a strong attraction for me ; and by the time I found myself fully qualified to kill or cure there was established within me

an unconquerable fascination for the theory of medicine—a dangerous fascination for one who has made a business of the healing art.

I mention these facts in order that it may be seen I am not a practical man. In the account I intend to give of Ralph Brabazon's case I do not mean to deal with it as if Mr. Brabazon were merely an interesting subject. I intend to treat of it rather as a student—no doubt a morbid student—of human nature, than as a cut and dried medico.

Though it would perhaps be better I should in the course of my narrative keep in the background the record of my own thoughts, sensations, hopes and fears, of the struggles which unnerved me, of everything which concerns myself alone, still, I cannot resist the temptation of laying bare the workings of my mind. At the same time I will endeavour to enter minutely into nothing which has not in some way direct or indirect bearing on the strange story of Ralph Brabazon.

Of the causes which led to my becoming an old man in spirit while I was a young man in years little need be said. It will be sufficient for me to state that in my youth I had experienced great hardships, endured great neglect. As a boy I had no friends: I did not then desire them. As a student I had no friends: then I did desire them. When I tried to make friends, I was unfortunate in my efforts. Those who responded to my advance proved one by one to be either deceitful, weak, or plainly anxious to cut themselves adrift from

me more quickly than they had attached themselves to me; and by the time I was five-and-twenty I had made up my mind that I had better walk through life alone.

No doubt I was chiefly to blame: strangers could not be expected to sympathise with me. I was moody, reflective, and—I suppose I must admit it—extremely slow. It did not then occur to me that it was myself and not the world who was to blame. My mind was of the passive order which abhors mental struggle.

Soon after I had shut my heart against the world the doors were rudely thrown open, and with a mad passion I loved—and was spurned.

Beyond this brief record of my early life there is nothing to be told which concerns the story I intend to relate. Nor does what I have told actually concern it, but it will account for the utter loneliness of my life at the time when my story begins.

## CHAPTER II.

MY home was a comfortable one. It was much too large for my bachelor requirements, but I have always had a taste for spacious, well-furnished rooms ; and not being dependent upon my profession for an income, I was enabled to gratify my taste in this regard. The house had been occupied for many years by my predecessor, who had spent a large amount of money upon it previous to transporting himself to the West End. Ordinary folk would have unhesitatingly called the situation cheerful. It was one of a dozen similar buildings on a terrace facing the principal road in a London suburb. The road was broad and had a bold crescent-like curve towards each end. At regular intervals on the road were planted chestnut trees, clothed in waxen blossoms during the early summer. Even the splendour of these trees in bloom had no soothing effect upon me, though I was ordinarily an admirer of all that is beautiful in nature. I always saw the chestnuts as I had first seen them in the winter when I settled down in my new house, standing with

gaunt bare boughs, raindrops trickling from the branches in dark slimy drops.

Thus, from the beginning, my house and its surroundings had, unaccountably, a depressing effect upon me.

I was an utter stranger in the suburb, and I felt powerless to make new friends. The only dwellers in my house besides myself were my ancient housekeeper and cook, Mrs. Chilcomb, and a housemaid—the boy who attended the surgery bell and went errands for me did not sleep on the premises.

It will be readily believed that with such a temperament as mine, my business—if I may employ such an unprofessional term—did not prosper. When I bought the practice from Doctor Stoker, an old friend of my father, it was worth about £1,000 a year. It was not worth half that sum when I had been a couple years in Doctor Stoker's house. Children seemed to like me, and I know I liked them; but fathers and mothers evidently thought I was crotchety; and so things went gradually from bad to worse, so far as my professional prospects were concerned. I did not murmur at this: I knew I alone was to blame. Were it not for my success in the treatment of children's ailments, my practice, I have little doubt, would have dwindled away altogether.

The room in my new home which I most affected was the study, a square-shaped apartment at the back of the house, with one large window overlooking a spacious park. The park was inclosed by a wooden paling, and was of unusual

extent for an open space of ground in the neighbourhood of London. I learned its area was about five hundred acres.

This park, from my first occupation of Dr. Stoker's house, had always possessed a strange fascination for me. It was a weird and desolate stretch of ground, planted here and there with trees of giant growth—haggard-looking, careworn trees, which seemed to become more haggard looking in the effort to send forth fresh foliage. In the early spring a sickly greenness enveloped them, which faded and rotted before the autumn tints had dyed the trees on the neighbouring roadway. The ground, so far as I could see, was encumbered with black and rotting boughs, and a tall, unhealthy growth, which could scarcely be called grass, covered the ground, which rose unevenly on all sides from the black, decaying paling, until the summit of a small hill was reached. Here the trees grew close together, and almost shut out the view of a high, gaunt dwelling-house.

It may have been that my morbid imagination invested this house and park with a more weird aspect than they actually possessed. I cannot tell. I can see only with my own eyes, and I have no knowledge of the effect which such a prospect as my study window afforded would have offered to a vision more wholesome than mine.

I am not—perhaps the statement is now unnecessary—inclined for gossip or given to curiosity, but I own I felt curious to know the secrets of Redpost House, for secrets there must be, it seemed to me. Yet I forebore to ask questions

concerning the place. Perhaps it was that I did not wish to let the world laugh at me for considering an ordinary red-brick mansion uncanny.

The suburb in which I dwelt was a comparatively new addition to Greater London. Twenty years before my advent open fields stood where now were roads and streets, houses and shops. London, in the guise of the speculative builder, had extended its octopus feelers and had quickly seized upon my suburb. For this reason few of those who now dwelt in it had any knowledge of the history—if such it may be called—of the suburb. Those who had lived in cottages had gone farther out, or had vanished into the maw of the great city to the east: those who dwelt in the once sparsely-scattered red-brick mansions had, at the approach of the building fiend, fled disconsolately, unconsciously emulating the example of their more humble neighbours, for some of them sought a haven in the great city to the west, and some had travelled further afield. Therefore was it that of the original dwellers in my suburb few had been left when I arrived there. If legends of Redpost House existed they did not reach my ears as I went my somewhat restricted rounds.

When I had been about five years in Dr. Stoker's house I sat one Sunday evening in March at my study window, gazing at the dim and dreary landscape, watching the shadowy night slowly swallowing up the great trees in the park. It was dusk when I took my seat in the embrasure

of the window, and the air outside was raw and chilling. I had just returned from a visit to a favourite patient of mine, who I feared very much was not destined to see another month of March. The child and I had become fast friends, and to me it grew to be a sad pleasure to visit him and amuse him with fairy lore. My thoughts were of the boy as I sat by the window—sad thoughts, unutterably sad. The child was almost my only friend, and soon he too would be only a part of my wasted, worthless, dreary past.

A white low-lying fog had sprung up as the daylight died away. It had now covered the low ground in the park, and brought into relief the clump of trees surrounding the deserted house—for no one dwelt in that mansion which had already invested itself with a halo of mystery for me.

Suddenly I started from my seat and, with my face pressed close against the window-pane, I stared at a bright yellow light which blinked at me through the hideous trees like an uneasy eye. A light in one of the windows in Redpost House! What could it mean?

Why I should have been so much affected by it I cannot now reason out, but I was trembling in every limb, and a cold sweat burst through every pore.

I should have gone stark, staring mad could I but have guessed what in years afterwards that yellow glare would reveal to me.

### CHAPTER III.

I SANK back into my chair and tried in vain to shut out from my mental vision that yellow light ; but it haunted me like a ghostly eye. I could see it, though I had turned my back upon the window. I felt that it was staring at me—staring steadily and mockingly at me—a demon's eye searching out my secrets, laughing at my oddities and my fears, confident in its own diabolical power to lure me towards evil, madness.

Again I must confess that to the well-balanced mind it must seem puerile on my part to have been so strangely disturbed by so simple a novelty as a light in a deserted house ; but it must be remembered—none can be more alive to the fact than I am—that my mind was not a well-balanced one, that I had allowed my morbid imagination to run riot with me until I had completely lost control over it.

After a long and futile endeavour to shake off the uneasy feeling which possessed me I rose to draw down the blind and light my study lamp. As I stood at the window again

the yellow eye—I could not regard it but as an eye—blinking at me through the trees, and with a stifled cry I sunk once more into my easy-chair. In a few moments I moved my chair to the fireplace and rang my bell. My housekeeper, Mrs. Chilcomb, answered the bell. “Light my lamp, if you please, and draw down the blind,” I said in an agitated tone.

I could not see her face, but evidently the tone of my voice alarmed her. She stood still in the centre of the room. Then she turned her face towards the window and lifting her hands cried,

“Lord ‘a’ mercy on us, sir. He *is* back again, sure enough!”

By this time I had almost recovered from my fit of terror and I asked calmly,

“Who is *he*? What do you mean?”

“The squire—or the squire’s son, I should say, to be more correct, sir—Mr. Ralph Brabazon. That light is in the old squire’s room.”

“Please draw down the blind and light the lamp,” I said a little testily. I was angry with myself.

Mrs. Chilcomb obeyed with a show of alacrity, and when she had fixed the lamp she turned her face towards me, and lifting her head, muttered:

“Lord ‘a’ mercy, sir, you do look bad. Are you ailing, sir?”

“No,” I answered gruffly, “I am quite well, thank you.”

Mrs. Chilcomb, but I have been a little quiet this evening."

"You look it, sir, if you'll pardon the liberty I take in saying so," she returned.

She was about to leave the room when I stopped her.

"Just a moment, Mrs. Chilcomb," I said. "You mentioned when you came into the room that Mr. Brabazon had returned to Redpost House. How did you hear that?"

My housekeeper's countenance was at once transformed from a moody, uncomfortable pucker into a broad confidential smile. I felt that I had all along possessed a treasure, a peripatetic budget of gossip, in Mrs. Chilcomb.

"Well, sir," she replied, "as you are kind enough to ask me—not that you often do the like, sir—I was out marketing just a while back, and I saw a great black coach lumbering along the road. I could scarce believe my eyes, sir, when I saw it stop at the lodge gate of Redpost House. Ah, sir, my poor old heart went back to the day before my unfortunate son took it into his head to 'list for a soldier. That was before your time here, sir."

"Yes," I murmured. "Well?" I felt I had started Mrs. Chilcomb's tongue, and that it would go on wagging till she had tortured me with a long pent-up family history.

"Well, sir, the coach stopped at the lodge gate, and I could see that the man who had stepped off the box seat was in some trouble about getting the coach started. It was always a strange look and wonderous thing."

What could Mrs. Chilcomb know about the lock? I ventured to reflect. Evidently the good lady guessed what my thoughts were.

"And who should know that lock better than my own self, that spent nigh on twenty years in the lodge in the old squire's time? Before your time, sir," she apologetically added.

At last I was roused into curiosity. "Then you were Mr. Brabazon's lodge-keeper?" I said.

"That I was, sir, and a strange time I had of it. But that's neither here nor there now, sir. Well, I went over to the man—such a nice-looking, white-haired old gentleman, he might have been a retired officer almost—and I told him who I was, or rather who I had been long ago, before your time, sir, and I offered to help him with the key, and after staring at me for a bit he allowed me to try my hand at the rusty lock. I opened it after a while, and a tough job I had of it, sir; but who should know that lock better than me?"

"And was Mr. Brabazon in the coach?" I inquired.

"I asked that question myself, sir; but the old gentleman, or footman or whatever he was, told me it was no business of mine. A testy old fellow, I'll be bound. But it must be himself, the son I mean," she added after a pause, "for that light"—I shuddered as I thought of it—"came from the old squire's room, and I make bold to say that no one but the son himself would dare to take liberties in that room."

"What sort of a person was this old Mr. Brabazon? He is dead, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Died soon after he left England; that will be thirty years come next Christmas. As you ask me—not that you often do the like, sir—I can tell you the old squire was a regular bad lot; not that I ought to say the like, having eaten his bread for many a year."

"Bad! How do you mean? Bad is such an elastic word, Mrs. Chilcomb," I said with a poor attempt—I knew it was a poor one—at a smile.

"No words, elastic as you says or not, could tell how bad. They said," she went on, bending her head towards me and sinking her voice into a whisper, "that he killed his poor wife; and some even went farther—"

"Farther!" I cried in amazement.

"Yes, sir, farther. I says it. He was in league with the devil himself, it is my own private belief."

I laughed at Mrs. Chilcomb's impressiveness as she delivered herself of this absurd charge against the late Mr. Brabazon; but I own, foolish as it may seem, her statement sent an uneasy shudder through my frame, and the influence of that strange yellow eye seemed for a while to reassert itself over my spirit. "I suppose you have often met the present Mr. Brabazon; when he was a boy, I mean?" I asked.

"Never once," replied my housekeeper with emphasis. "Neither I nor any one that I know ever laid eyes on the young squire."

"That is strange," I remarked. "Did he not live at Redpost House?"

"He did live there. At least, so I believe, sir; but never a one about the place except the old squire, to the best of my belief, ever saw the present Mr. Brabazon so long as the family resided in the house."

"That is an unlikely story, Mrs. Chilcomb. Think now. Are you not forgetting?"

"Perhaps I am, perhaps I am," she murmured, folding her arms and leaning her head on one side in an attitude of thought. "No one, we used to say, but a young man, a kind of steward on the estate. And I believe," she added, lifting her head, "a gentleman like yourself—a doctor, I mean—a great friend of the dead Mr. Brabazon, used to be constantly in the house, and it was said he could tell a queer tale of the young one—of the whole family, father and son, for the mother, poor young woman, died in childbirth."

"You said a while ago she had been killed."

"So I did, so I did; and so maybe it was. They brought it out childbirth, sir. Ah, there were dark deeds done in that house," continued the old lady, shaking her forefinger in the direction of the window. "Dark deeds, dark deeds!"

"You are somewhat vague," I observed. "What sort of dark deeds do you mean?"

"Oh, Doctor," she cried, "you must not ask me any more, and indeed it is little I know only from hearsay, and hearsay isn't of much value, particularly after half a lifetime."

I was obliged to confess that I had been interesting myself in a good deal of foolish gossip ; and although Mrs. Chilcomb's rambling, incoherent account of the Brabazon family suddenly began to lose all interest for me, yet, strange as it may seem, every word of the conversation I had with her, and every sensation I experienced that Sunday evening had photographed itself on my brain.

## CHAPTER IV.

FOR many months I tried to banish from my mind all thoughts of Redpost House. The light had never again appeared in the window facing my study. Often I had fearfully looked for it across the dim shadows of the park, but it was never there.

Strange rumours, brought to me chiefly by Mrs. Chilcomb, reached my ears occasionally about the owner of the house. He had, it was said, but two servants in that great, black dwelling—the man who had driven the coach the evening of Mr. Brabazon's return, and the elderly man whom Mrs. Chilcomb had aided in unlocking the lodge gate. The younger man did any shopping necessary. He was taciturn and gruff, but occasionally in a paroxysm of jealous temper he would inveigh against his fellow servant. The elderly man had it all his own way, said the younger man; lorded it over the house as if it were his own, and waited exclusively on his master. The strangest part of the younger servant's story was that he had seldom seen his master's

face, and never once heard his voice, and that Mr. Brabazon remained in bed, or at all events was locked in his bedroom, all day. He was in the habit, the servant stated, of wandering through the park alone at night, and sometimes did not return to the house until dawn; but the servant had never the courage to follow Mr. Brabazon in his wanderings through the grounds.

The general impression created in the neighbourhood about the strange trio in Redpost House was that they were all more or less mad, and that Mr. Brabazon was a dangerous lunatic in the charge of an imbecile keeper—the elderly servant.

After I had heard that it was Mr. Brabazon's habit to indulge in nightly rambles through the park, I often, through the soft summer nights, sat at my open study window—the black paling surrounding the park formed the boundary of my garden—endeavouring to catch a glimpse, however faint, of my mysterious neighbour; but I never saw anything resembling a human figure in the grounds.

At last I concluded that the stories I had heard were idle gossip; but sometimes the impression seized me that a dark figure was crouched behind the paling, waiting for an opportunity to pounce upon and destroy me. Then, trembling in every limb, I would hurriedly close my window and betake myself to one of the rooms in the front of the house; and in a little while I would find myself laughing at my foolish fears, and comforting myself with the thought that if Mr. Brabazon

were really mad and misanthropical he would avoid the neighbourhood of the terrace in which my house stood, the only portion of his grounds bordered by dwelling houses.

No doubt my fears and the means by which I sought to allay them were silly in the extreme; but I cannot too strongly impress upon the sympathetic reader—if I ever find a sympathetic reader—the dangerously morbid condition into which the “odd Doctor,” as I had grown to be called in the neighbourhood, had, almost without a struggle, allowed his mental faculties to drift.

## CHAPTER V.

ABOUT a twelvemonth after Mr. Brabazon's arrival at Redpost House I was compounding some prescriptions in my surgery one evening when the surgery bell was rung loudly. In a few moments I was informed that a man desired to see me. He gave no name. I told my boy, who announced the stranger, to show him in.

I was in the habit of devoting two hours each evening—from seven until nine o'clock—to poor patients who paid what they could, or did not pay at all—just as they chose. The man who entered my surgery I judged at once to be a gentleman's servant. He had that peculiar air and gait, half arrogant, half servile, which belongs only to the better class domestic. Almost mechanically I was about to feel his pulse and examine his tongue, when he hastily, and in a gruff, unpleasant voice, exclaimed :

“My master, Mr. Brabazon, wishes to see you at once.”

I started at the words, but managed to recover my composure immediately.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Fell, I believe," replied Mr. Brabazon's servant. "I had no doubt now he was the young man of whom Mrs. Carter had spoken; "and injured his leg."

"Broke it, do you mean?" I inquired.

"Suppose so. Don't know," was the gruff response.

I rang my bell and told the boy to order my brougham round at once. There was no coachhouse attached to my dwelling, and I kept my carriage in a neighbouring road.

"We'd be at the house by the time your carriage will be at the door," interposed Mr. Brabazon's servant.

I was aware of this. A quarter of an hour I judged would take me on foot to Redpost House; but I did not like the idea of walking at night alone, or in company with Mr. Brabazon's servant, through that gloomy park. I saw the man was inclined to exhibit further traces of impatience, so I instructed my messenger to tell my coachman to follow me to the house; and Mr. Brabazon's servant and I started on foot at once for Redpost House.

In five minutes we had passed through the lodge gateway, and I was then for the first time inside the black paling which bordered Redpost Park. I now experienced a sensation which, had I been asked by a patient to account for, I should have attributed either to champagne or—probably much to the annoyance of the patient—acidity of the stomach. My head swam; my gait was unsteady.

I could see, though the night was dark, that the approach

to Redpost House was, or at least had been once, a broad winding carriage way. The road was now overgrown with short grass, and it was only the absence of trees and shrubs that marked it as a roadway.

I began to speculate on the cause of my giddy sensations, and ere we had reached the house I made up my mind that they were produced by the malaria-like vapour which hovered over the park. Vapour of that kind always produces on me a similar effect—a giddiness at once pleasant and painful; but I had never been affected so strongly as upon this occasion. I seemed to be inhaling a strange, subtle, poisonous atmosphere. I mention this matter of my sensations as I proceeded in silence (my companion was apparently wrapped up in his gloomy self, and walked slightly in front of me with his hands clasped behind his back) through the park, because it afterwards appeared to myself not a little odd that I did not question my guide about his master, and endeavour to discover for myself if I were really on the eve of a visit to a lunatic—as Mr. Brabazon by common consent was adjudged in my neighbourhood.

Turning a sharp angle of the road I stumbled over a rotten branch which lay across my path, and as I steadied myself I lifted my head and saw that I was now within a stone's throw of the house, and that no other light was visible except the yellow glare in one of the upper windows—that glare which had affected me so strangely about a twelvemonth previously. Quickening my steps I caught up with my guide

—companion I could scarcely call him—and asked him when had the accident occurred to Mr. Brabazon. A gruff “don’t know” was the only reply I got. Before I had time to put any further questions we were at the foot of the steps leading to the hall door. Together we mounted them, and Mr. Brabazon’s servant, taking a key from his pocket, opened the ponderous door of Redpost House. The hall was in utter darkness, and I had almost begun to fear that I had been decoyed into the house for some occult purpose, when the servant struck a match, and lighting a lamp which lay on the hall table, beckoned me to follow him upstairs.

Up six flights of broad stone stairs we toiled, and at last we reached a landing upon which three black panelled doors opened out. Knocking at one of these doors a quiet “Come in” reached my ears. The servant then stepped backward, and addressing me, said, “Go in, please.”

The room I entered had but one window, covered with a pale yellow blind. This window was lozenge-shaped, and the lowermost part of it was not more than a couple of feet from the floor. It was a sombre apartment. The furniture and draperies were all black. The floor was of polished oak, and gleamed like a sheet of dark glass. A lamp was on the table near the window. These details my eyes took in at a swift glance, and then I saw in a corner of the room an elderly white-haired man, whose back was towards me, leaning over a couch. He turned as I closed the door behind me, and in a gentle voice said,

"Doctor Emanuel, I presume?"

"Yes," I replied. "Where is my patient?"

"Here," said the old man, pointing to a couch on which a figure was strapped down.

Instantly I concluded that the surmises about Mr. Brabazon's state of mind were correct. He was, then, not only mad, but dangerously mad. The old man perhaps guessed my thoughts, and, a trace of a smile overspreading his features, he observed,

"Mr. Brabazon is suffering from nothing but the result of his accident. He would insist on ignoring the fact that he can't walk, and he wanted to walk. He is very obstinate, so I was obliged to have resort to strong measures."

I was about to speak when a voice from the couch—a thick, guttural voice, which seemed to have nothing human in it, tightened my already highly strung nerves.

"Ashcroft is quite right, Doctor. He always is quite right. See to my ankle, please. It burns like the pains of hell."

I knelt down by the couch. As I did so Mr. Brabazon's eyes looked straight into mine with a hideous yellow glitter. In some unaccountable way they brought back to me the fearful creepy sensations I had experienced the first night I had seen the light staring into my study window. So unnerved was I that my hands trembled violently as I endeavoured to undo the bandages which had been placed round my patient's ankle. A tremulous movement pervaded

Mr. Brabazon's frame. He must, of course, have observed my agitation, and was evidently chuckling.

"Don't be afraid, Doctor ; I won't, in fact I can't, bite you."

Mr. Ashcroft was now standing at the head of the couch. A deep shadow crossed his face as Mr. Brabazon spoke. Then turning his eyes towards me he said in a calm, soothing voice,

"Please pay no attention to him, Doctor, the pain has upset him very much."

"Ashcroft is right. He always is right. Don't mind me, Doctor," said Mr. Brabazon. Then I observed that my patient stretched out his hand, and Ashcroft knelt down beside the couch and stroked the palm tenderly.

No bones were broken, I found ; but the ankle had got an ugly twist. As there was no abrasion of the skin I applied a strong liniment and bandaged afresh the injured foot. Then I caught my patient's outstretched hand, which Mr. Ashcroft gave up to me as if he were relinquishing some sacred trust, and felt his pulse. Turning to Mr. Ashcroft I said,

"I will give Mr. Brabazon an opiate,"

At first the old man shook his head—in fact, he seemed to act the part of another physician, and a more accomplished one than myself. Then, after a pause, he said,

"Very well, Doctor, if you think it best ; but let it be a very small dose. I know Mr. Brabazon's constitution. I

will administer the dose to him myself when you are gone. He is somewhat nervous when strangers are near, and he might rebel at my pressing a draught upon him in your presence."

"Yes," said the voice from the couch. "Ashcroft is right. He always is right," and the hand was again stretched forth in search of the old man's hand.

"I'll call again in the morning," I said, rising to my feet. "Mr. Brabazon seems a little feverish, but the sprain is nothing to be alarmed about."

"It is only the pain," said Mr. Ashcroft confidently. "that makes him a little uneasy. You must not call in the morning, Doctor. Call to-morrow evening at the same hour."

"But——" I interposed.

"Please don't ask me questions, Doctor," interrupted the old man—his tone was such that I could not dream of taking offence. "It must be to-morrow night, not to-morrow morning; and thank you very much for your promptness and your kindness."

I found time now to make a swift examination of my strange patient and his companion.

The most remarkable thing about Mr. Brabazon was the expression of those eyes which had at first given me such a horrible shock of repulsion. As I gazed at him now the dark pupils were for a moment illumined with a lambent fire, and their expression was one of mingled suffering and gratitude—gratitude, I suppose, for the services I had

rendered him. It struck me there was something of the animal in the expression of the eyes—something more like the wistful, grateful gaze of a dog than that of a human being. But at the same time, there was nothing bestial in their expression. The horrible glare and glitter which had greeted me at my first sight of him had vanished completely. Nor was there aught of madness in those weird windows of the soul: on the contrary, their humanity—I can find no better word—was, as he found my gaze fixed upon him, striking. To sum up, there were three distinct sets of expressions in the eyes: the cat-like, serpent-like glitter, the dumb thankful dog-like stare, and the extraordinary intellectual fire which lit them up, as in a soft voice he murmured somewhat indistinctly, "Thank you very much, Doctor; we'll be better friends, I hope." For the rest, Mr. Brabazon—whom I judged to be about my own age—was strangely black; I can use no other word in describing him. His plentiful hair was jet black, his eyes black, his lips, cheeks, and chin covered with a soft, black down which looked more like floss than hair. He was dressed in a tightly-fitting suit of black, and wore a black silk shirt and black silk stockings.

It was with difficulty that I could get a glimpse of Mr. Ashcroft's countenance, but in moving across the room, as I was drawing on my gloves, the light from the lamp came full upon his face. If he was a servant in the ordinary sense of the word, he was a servant of a unique kind; and at once I dismissed from my mind the notion that Mr. Ashcroft occu-

pied the position assigned to him by idle gossip, that of half menial, half keeper. His features were refined and intelligent, and there was an impress of sad resignation on them as if he had lived his life in the companionship of one who suffered and was weak and whom he fondly loved. It struck me at the time that the expression I noted was caused, not by his enduring mental or physical trouble of his own, but by his enduring it for the sake of some one else. The impression, hastily formed as it was, that sympathy lay at the root of Mr. Ashcroft's careworn expression was after years confirmed. His hair was of silvery whiteness, and, like Mr. Brabazon, he dressed in black, but there was not, as in Mr. Brabazon's case, any obtrusiveness in the sombre colour of his garments. His face was clean shaven, and on each cheek two small livid spots were visible. These spots looked in the light like cicatrices, and though they were of course a disfigurement, they did not distort his features nor detract from their natural serenity.

As I was about to leave the room—Mr. Ashcroft had his hand on the handle of the door—Mr. Brabazon, in that half indistinct voice of his, cried with startling eagerness,

"Ashcroft! what's that? What noise is that outside?"

Mr. Ashcroft walked quickly across the room to the window, and putting one hand behind his ear stood for a moment in a listening attitude.

"Wheels," he said quietly. "Carriage wheels."

A groan from the couch sent a thrill through me.

Then instantly I said, "No doubt it is my horse. I ordered my man to follow me." I had heard no sounds outside until I had spoken, but then I plainly heard the rumble of wheels.

"You are sure, Doctor?" came in a plaintive wail from my patient.

"Quite sure now," I answered, approaching the window. "I recognise the rattle of my brougham; it is a somewhat rickety affair."

A sigh of intense relief burst from Mr. Brabazon. I whispered to Mr. Ashcroft that he ought to administer the opiate without further delay. With a reassuring smile he advanced to the door and opened it for me. On the landing I found the gruff creature who had summoned me to Mr. Brabazon, lamp in hand. He followed me down the great stone stairs holding a lamp high over his head. In a few moments I was seated in a corner of my brougham.

## CHAPTER VI.

BARREN of exciting incident as my first visit to Mr. Brabazon had been, every trifle connected with my short stay in the sombre room impressed itself vividly upon me, and through the long night I lay awake pondering the words and actions of Mr. Brabazon and Mr. Ashcroft. I endeavoured fruitlessly to shut out the obtrusive vision of Mr. Brabazon's dark figure, of his changeful eyes sometimes hideously repellant, sometimes strangely fascinating, and to close my ears against his guttural indistinct utterances, his cry of alarm at the sound of the carriage wheels—the sound which had reached his ears long before it reached mine—and the sigh of intense relief as he learned the sound was caused by my rickety brougham.

Next evening and for many subsequent evenings I visited Redpost House. My patient still lay upon the couch, but the straps had been removed. Mr. Ashcroft was always there, and we had many quiet, pleasant chats. I found Mr. Brabazon and his companion were both men of large and broad

intelligence. They seemed to be men of the world who had travelled much, read much, seen much, and observed closely. They possessed singularly few prejudices, and Mr. Brabazon was peculiarly interested in what interested me most—the theory of medicine. In the dark mysteries of toxicology he was quite an adept, and often astonished me with new and remarkable views of his own on poisons and their antidotes. “I hate your surgeons who slash and cut,” he once said, with a visible shudder convulsing his long lithe frame, “but the healing art has always been a pet study of mine.” I observed once or twice that a gloomy shade fell across Mr. Ashcroft’s face as Mr. Brabazon and I fought out some knotty problem in poisoning, and I also noticed he did not take any part in the conversation when medicine was the topic of the hour.

One evening the conversation turning, as it often had before, on subtle poisons, Mr. Brabazon, with unusual energy and excitement in his voice and manner, said,

“Tell me, Doctor, have you ever given much attention to snake bite?” Arising as it did out of our previous conversation, the question was quite a natural one, and I would have replied with perfect ease had not I caught sight of the expression on Mr. Ashcroft’s face—an expression of dismay and pain. I feared my good friend was suffering from some acute spasm, and before replying to Mr. Brabazon I turned to the elder man and asked if he was ailing. A quiet smile, but still a smile in which a latent fear lurked, stole into his face, and he said,

"It is nothing. But, Dr. Emanuel, I sometimes feel a kind of horror possess me when I hear such deadly subjects discussed in a cold, matter-of-fact manner."

"In that case, then," I observed, "let us dismiss the unhealthy subject."

I turned to Mr. Brabazon, but the eagerness and excitement did not leave him, and he said,

"Oh! Mr. Ashcroft is only a little nervous; but we shall not harm him, Doctor, shall we? You were about to answer about snake poison. Mr. Ashcroft will not mind, I am sure."

The old man nodded to me as if he wished me to pay no attention to him, but to do as his master desired; still I felt unwilling to answer Mr. Brabazon even then.

The latter observing my hesitation, said, "Do humour me, Doctor; it is a subject which interests me immensely. Have you had any practical experience in the matter of snake bite? I mean, have you ever treated a person who has been bitten?"

Strangely enough I could answer this question in the affirmative. I had once treated a man who had been severely bitten by a most venomous reptile. Such accidents are most uncommon in England, I need scarcely say, and the case had naturally interested me very much at the time. So I replied to Mr. Brabazon's question:

"Yes, oddly enough, I have helped to drag a fellow being back to life who had been bitten by a cobra."

"Where?" asked my host. "In England?"

"Yes. At the time I was attached to a great hospital in the East End. A man was brought in one day who had been bitten at a place in the neighbourhood where they deal in serpents."

"And does such a place exist still?" asked Mr. Brabazon eagerly.

"Yes. They traffic in everything four-footed, two-footed, and no-footed—from an elephant to an adder."

"But your case, Doctor. Tell me what the symptoms were."

"The man had been bitten in the arm. When I saw him first he was excessively restless and giddy and could not stand steadily, but moved about as if he were drunk. His pulse was slow, feeble and irregular, and he breathed like one suffering from a distressing asthma. I remember the case well, for it was a most unusual one."

"Well, what did you do for him?"

"While I was being informed of the cause of the wound he became convulsive. I did not hesitate, but sucked the venom from the wound, cauterised it, and tied a ligature about it. Then I injected ammonia into his arm—there is no need to trouble you with details as to the quantity or quality—and he was able to tell me almost immediately that he felt relief. I continued injecting large quantities of ammonia at intervals until I had reduced the convulsions to a gentle spasm. Eventually he went away cured. But

it was fortunate he had been brought to the hospital so quickly. Not more than a quarter of an hour had elapsed from the time he received the bite until I had commenced to treat him."

"Then is ammonia injection the recognised treatment for snake bite?"

"It is, perhaps, the best treatment known, but I should not like to answer for its efficacy in every case. Permanganate of potash has been recommended, but I have little faith in it. In fact I should not like to answer for the efficacy of any antidote in a bad case and with a weakly constitution. My patient happened to be of singularly powerful build, and I saw him very soon after his accident. I learned afterwards that one of his companions had sucked the wound almost immediately after he had been bitten, and had performed a rough kind of cauterisation by inserting a hot needle into each of the punctures, so that I could not altogether take the credit of having cured him. But I am confident he would have died had a physician not seen him, for there is no question some of the poison had permeated his system."

Mr. Brabazon seemed to be greatly interested in what I had told him and he questioned me still more closely about the symptoms of my patient and the possibility of discovering some certain antidote for the subtle poison of a venomous snake. I could not give him much information on the latter point, knowing, as I did, the component parts of snake venom were still a matter for dispute amongst physicians, and that

until the exact nature of the poison could be ascertained the discovery of a perfect antidote could not be made. He surprised me a little by asking if I had ever heard of inoculation for snake bite. I had heard of it, but was rather inclined to doubt the efficacy of inoculation. "Besides," I asked, "who would willingly suffer himself to be inoculated on the odd chance of being bitten by a venomous reptile?" Mr. Brabazon in answer to this said, "True, true," and was silent for some time.

"Do you know, Dr. Emanuel," he said, breaking the silence, "I have always detested men of your profession. You are the second doctor who has ever visited me, with my consent."

Mr. Ashcroft, who had sat in silence while Mr. Brabazon and I were discussing snake poison, here endeavoured, somewhat awkwardly too, to turn the conversation into another channel, but with a gesture of his supple fingers, Mr. Brabazon interrupted him with,

"Nay, Ashcroft, you are always right, I know, but I want to put myself straight with Dr. Emanuel." Then turning to me he continued, "I have good reasons to hate doctors." Mr. Ashcroft bit his lip and winced. Some powerful emotion possessed him, it was evident—"But I had heard a good deal of you through that gossiping servant of mine down stairs. They told me you were an odd sort of fellow—pray forgive me if I wound your feelings: I do not mean to do so—that you were not at all like the ordinary medical man," he went

on, with a swift, searching glance at me. No doubt he was fearful of having offered me some offence, but as I merely smiled and offered no remark, he continued: "I mean when I say like ordinary men that you were very clever"—I shook my head sadly—"and did not give yourself fair play, and that you had no intimate friends. Is that the case, Doctor?" he asked, not offensively, but still with an eagerness which might have offended a person of quicker temper than myself.

"It is so," I replied. Unintentionally there was a profound sadness in my voice, and Mr. Ashcroft said,

"Mr. Brabazon, I must protest again. This is grossly unfair to Dr. Emanuel."

I thought there was some stronger motive than regard for my feelings actuating Mr. Ashcroft's protest, and I was about to confess that I should prefer to change the subject when Mr. Brabazon, fixing those curious eyes of his on me, asked in a tone that was almost child-like in its innocence:

"Do I offend you, Doctor? Don't say I do if you can really bear with me a little longer. I want to say a few more words to you. I really do."

I could not resist the appeal which his eyes—now full of that wistful, dog-like gaze which I had observed during my first visit—made to me, and I said,

"You do not offend me, I assure you. I have no friends, no secrets."

He winced as I said this; and Mr. Ashcroft, seeing that

he was powerless to influence Mr. Brabazon, placed his elbow on the mantelpiece, and leaning his cheek against his hand, averted his head. There was silence in the room for a few moments, and then Mr. Brabazon, his hands clasped behind his head, again renewed the attack.

"Do you know," he said, "I have spoken as a friend to no man except Ashcroft for ever so many years." He did not wait for an exclamation of surprise which was trembling on my lips, but went on, "And yet," with unutterable sadness, "I am fond of companions. There are times when I long to go into the great world to be courted, fêted, idolised—I am immensely wealthy—and yet I cannot go."

Mr. Ashcroft was visibly uneasy. He shifted his position, and, turning round, placed his left elbow on the mantelpiece, his left hand supporting his head, his right arm dangling by his side. "I can make no friends. I am a pariah. I had heard about you, Doctor, and I conceived for you a sudden liking. My impulses are quick, and often unaccountable. I have watched you many a night as you sat in the dark at your study window."

"Watched me," I interrupted in amazement. "From here?"

"I protest, Mr. Brabazon. Emphatically I protest against this," cried Ashcroft with sudden energy.

"Ashcroft, old fellow," said the master of the house, "you are always right, I know; but can I have no other friend? You will leave me one day."

"Never," said the old man, "till I die." And then, bursting into tears, he knelt by the couch and clasped Mr. Brabazon's hand. "It is but natural I should go before him ; but I never thought of that—never once—till now. But not now, Doctor—not now. In pity's sake leave me, leave us both. You would thank me if you only knew—thank me from the bottom of your heart—for turning you away. But do not come here—pray do not come here again until I send for you."

To say that I was affected by the wild words of the silver-haired old man would be saying but little. A choking sensation in my throat prevented me from declaring how grieved I was to part with two people, comparative strangers though they were, who had in some mysterious manner wound themselves round my lonely heart. Stooping down I pressed Mr. Brabazon's hand, and then I pressed the hand of the elder man, and in silence I left the room.

## CHAPTER VII.

MY intercourse with the dwellers in Redpost House had effected a change in my mental condition. I was no longer so wrapped in myself and in moody introspection. The companionship of the two men had made me feel that it was absurd and inexcusable that I should without just cause allow myself to drift slowly but surely into a condition of helpless and hopeless misanthropy. My patients, sadly reduced in number as they were, soon discovered I was a little more cheerful, and that my disposition was not so morose as they had been inclined to believe.

They accused themselves, wrongfully, of course, of having misjudged me, and by degrees I found my practice began to increase. This would not have affected me in any degree some months previously, but now that I was earnestly striving to conquer my old self it did affect me, and made me redouble my energy in the attempt to shake off the burden of self-imposed despair which had lain so heavily upon my spirit for many years.

To lose the companionship of Mr. Brabazon and Mr. Ashcroft I was unfeignedly sorry. For the former I had begun to cherish a feeling of real affection, mingled with pity, and not a little coloured by a mysterious kind of awe. Though he had, previous to the night he exhibited so much excitement, neither said nor done anything in my presence that would single him out from the ordinary run of men, still I had a conviction that there was some mystery, some strange, indefinable weirdness enveloping him; a conviction which his own words had strengthened. For Mr. Ashcroft I entertained an affection of a less pronounced but no less decided kind. About him, too, there was something of weirdness, but it was a reflected weirdness. Without Mr. Brabazon he would, I judged, have been a benevolent, kind-hearted old man of the most ordinary type. Even the intellectual fire within him would probably have grown cold—Mr. Brabazon always seemed to me to be the steel and Mr. Ashcroft the flint—had it not been for the companionship of his master.

The use of the word "master" reminds me that I ought to have stated I was unable ever to discover what relations the two men held towards each other. That Mr. Ashcroft was Mr. Brabazon's equal from a social point of view I could not believe; and yet the younger man deferred to the elder almost in everything.

For several months I received no communication from Redpost House, except one short note from Mr. Ashcroft dating about a week after the night on which I had been so

abruptly dismissed. He merely stated that Mr. Brabazon was once more able to walk about his room as usual, and that the writer felt more strongly than ever the unwisdom of my renewing my visits to the house. Mr. Ashcroft's letter concluded with warm expressions of gratitude for the pleasure Doctor Emanuel's company had given himself and Mr. Brabazon.

September had come round, and the trees in Redpost Park were shedding their few withered leaves. The weather was cold for the month of September, but it was neither wet nor foggy. The air was clear and sharp, and had a bracing effect. For many years a terrible depression used to seize hold of me with the fall of the leaf, but this September I enjoyed a greater buoyancy of spirits than I had known since my student days.

One evening—it was about eight o'clock—I was sitting in my study, poring over a ponderous ledger, when a visitor was announced—a lady. She had neither given her name nor sent in her card. She said I was not acquainted with her, and she did not call upon me professionally. I desired my maid to show her into the study.

She was tall, and though she wore a long, loosely-fitting cloak, I could see that her figure was an uncommonly good one. Her veil was down as she entered the room. I rose and placed a chair for her. She sat down and lifted her veil. I was startled by the wonderful beauty of her face. It was

a cold, transparently white face, and as she turned her eyes towards me I was startled once more, and not by the beauty of the eyes—and they would, I have no doubt, be deemed by most men wonderfully beautiful—but by the intensely cold, hard glitter they showed as she fixed her gaze upon me. That woman would do anything, dare anything, I thought.

In a moment came a sudden change—a winning smile overspread her features, and a soft, pleasant light stole into her eyes. That woman could twist most men round her finger was my hasty reflection. She read my thoughts easily.

“Dr. Emanuel,” she said, in a low, full voice of remarkable sweetness; “we shall be friends, I know!”

I bowed and said I hoped we should—lip homage, for I feared the woman, and felt quite ill at ease in her presence.

“I have not given you my name, for you would not recognise it; but it will be better, I suppose, that I should tell you who I am—necessary, in fact,” she added with a smile.

I bowed again and was silent.

“My name is Madeline Viacava. I am a friend—or, perhaps, I should say, I was a friend, a very dear friend—of Mr. Brabazon.”

“A friend of Mr. Brabazon!” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Yes. Does it not seem strange?” There was a slight trace of a foreign accent in her voice. I had noticed it before. “You too are a friend of Mr. Brabazon?”

"My acquaintance with him is very slight," I said. "I have not seen him for months."

"It is a wonderful thing to be a friend of Mr. Brabazon. It is a wonderful thing even to have spoken to him," she observed. "Do you know that?"

"Yes, he mentioned on one occasion that he had no friend—scarcely an acquaintance—but," I added hastily, "I do not think I am justified in discussing Mr. Brabazon with a stranger."

She laughed.

"You are wise ; it is well to be cautious ; but," with a disdainful curl of her lip, "you need not fear to discuss Mr. Brabazon with me. I know his secret."

"I know nothing of his secrets, if he has any," I interrupted. "Pray believe that,"

"Secret, I said." She spoke with sudden energy. "There is but one secret. But what a secret ! It is marvellous, stupendous, horrible," she went on, tapping her foot on the carpet. "If it were known, England would not hold him ; Europe would not hold him ; the world would not hold him. I hate him, I loathe him—and yet I have never spoken to him."

The woman was mad. A moment ago she had stated she was a friend of Mr. Brabazon ; now she declared she had never even spoken to him.

"You are utterly mistaken," she went on more calmly, reading my thoughts. "I am as sane as you are, doctor ;

though the thought of what I know, of what I could tell, might fairly turn a mind less well-balanced than mine. You have never been in Mr. Brabazon's presence alone?" she asked; "a Mr. Ashcroft was always with him, was he not?"

"He was," I answered. It was almost against my will I spoke, but I felt I was being carried along by this mysterious mad woman.

"You may thank heaven for that." Then laughing she continued, "I am, perhaps, too impetuous; it is stupid of me; I did not come here to say what I have just said. I want to ask a few questions, Doctor; you will answer me I know."

"How can I tell?"

"You will," she said with a ravishing smile. "Forget my wild words, Doctor."

She rose and laid her hand on my arm. Her touch thrilled me; I felt I was in the power of this woman; utterly in her power.

"You know more of Mr. Brabazon than any one else in the neighbourhood—in England, for the matter of that."

"I told you I know little or nothing of him."

"You know sufficient for me, I hope. Does he indulge in nightly prowls in the park?"

"I do not know; my visits to him were paid at night time, and I have seen him in his room only. You have heard some gossip in the neighbourhood?"

"Gossip!" she said, curling her lips; "I have not been in the neighbourhood twenty-four hours. I want to see Mr.

Brabazon. I am not exceptionally nervous, but I would not, even if I were armed to the teeth, like to encounter him alone in the park. I would rather meet the devil himself. You smile, Doctor; but I am in earnest. At what hour, or between what hours, have you met Mr. Brabazon with Mr. Ashcroft? I want to meet him when Mr. Ashcroft is with him, and I want you to tell me how I can get to the house, and how I am to get to his room."

"You ask a good deal. Why question me and not Mr. Brabazon? Or why not write to him if you do not care to visit him?"

"You do not know," she smiled. "He would not see me. He would fly from me like an arrow from a bow."

I was very uncomfortable. It was not at all improbable this woman had some evil design upon the man I had learned to like. If I gave her any information, and what information I could give would be of very little value, should I not be playing the part of a false friend?

"You need not hesitate," she said. "Already you have unconsciously told me what I desired to know—that Mr. Ashcroft is still with my friend. So long as the old gentleman remains with Mr. Brabazon I count myself safe; but it is always better to make assurance doubly sure. What servants are in the house?"

"One man servant," I answered.

"A man!" exclaimed my visitor, "I shall be able to manage him." A gleam of triumph shot from her eyes

as she spoke. "You have not told me between what hours you used to find him closeted with the wonderful old Mentor, Ashcroft?"

"I do not see why I should tell you."

"Surely it cannot hurt you to enlighten me. If you do not tell me I must only take my chance. You had better tell me. Do, please."

Again she thrilled me with her touch, and I answered her. "Between eight and eleven I have visited him, and between these hours I have always found him with Mr. Ashcroft."

"Thank you, Doctor. It is now nine o'clock," taking out a small gold watch. "I am impulsive, impatient; I will try to see my friend to-night—at once."

I felt uneasy at this statement. My visitor saw I was inclined to persuade her to reconsider her resolution—why the inclination should have possessed me I could not clearly satisfy myself; and extending her hand she murmured,

"Good night, Doctor, do not be alarmed; I am forewarned, therefore forearmed. Thank you for your courtesy. We shall meet soon again, and then, perhaps, I shall have a word to say to you concerning Mr. Brabazon's secret."

I looked into her eyes, and a dreamy, langourous gaze greeted me.

"Good night, Doctor," she said, breaking the brief spell of silence which had fallen upon us.

The pressure of her hand, and the subtle perfume of her garments were intoxicating. I seemed to have lost all power

of speech or motion. The withdrawal of her hand recalled my wandering senses, but before I had found my tongue she was gone ; and I stood in the centre of the room, a delicious bewilderment still clinging to me.

The closing of the hall door soon grated upon my ears, and the sound chilled me for an instant with a vague, incomprehensible dread. Then the memory—a memory which exercised over me an influence more powerful even than her actual presence had exercised—of Madeline Viacava's eyes, of her voice, of her smile, of the clinging pressure of her hand, shut out everything from my senses ; and sinking into my chair I closed my eyes in ecstasy.

## CHAPTER VIII.

I MUST have sat for more than half an hour, giddy with a delicious whirl of dreams of Madeline Viacava—whether she was maid, wife, or widow, I knew not—when the loud double rap of the postman at the hall door brought me back from the region of dreams to the world of prosaic reality.

My servant brought me a letter. I tore open the envelope in nervous haste, as if I was aware it contained some important communication. I seized gladly upon any pretext to divert my thoughts, and I hoped with a strength of hope which was wholly inadequate to the occasion, that I should find a letter requiring an immediate reply. I found only a tradesman's circular. In disgust I tore the circular to pieces, and opening the window, flung the pieces out into the darkness. The breath of the night air was cooling and refreshing; I placed my elbows on the window-sill, and remained at the open window gazing at the dim and shadowy landscape. There was no moon, but the stars were brilliant and stood out clearly in their dark cavernous setting.

My thoughts flew back unchecked to Madeline. That I was in love with her, that the mad, unreasoning, all-absorbing passion which once in a lifetime seizes hold of most men of a nervous temperament like mine—a passion unaccountable in its origin, unaccountable in its decay; a passion which often shapes for weal or woe the destinies of its victim—had now seized hold of me, I could not doubt.

How often had I combated the theory, "Whoever loved that loved not at first sight?" And here I now stood a silent worshipper at the shrine of a woman I had seen but once, of whom I knew nothing save her name! Why had I not detained her a little longer? Why had I not dissuaded her from attempting to wander alone through the terrible park? But I should see her soon again—soon be under the influence of her beautiful eyes and her low sweet voice; soon perhaps feel again the pressure of her hand. Was she now treading that ghostly, grass-grown carriage way, her heart fluttering like a dove as she flew from the shadows of those desolate trees? Or had she by this time reached the house? Perhaps at this moment, as I stood gazing through the filmy shadows of the park, she was in the room where I had so often sat and talked to Mr. Brabazon and Mr. Ashcroft.

My thoughts at this point diverged slightly. What was this secret which encompassed Mr. Brabazon? Madeline's words, the mingled horror and disgust which she exhibited as she alluded to the secret, the rumours of something

strange and terrible which had been conveyed to me before my visitor to-night had confirmed the truth of such rumours, now filled my excited mind, and a black and hideous spectre seemed to rise from the shadows in the park, tainting the air with noxious odours.

Shuddering, I lifted my hand to draw down the window.

Before my hand had grasped the frame the sound of a pistol-shot resounded through the cool night air, and then a terrible cry burst on my listening ears and froze my very blood.

For an instant I was stupefied with horror, but a reaction set in quickly, and my blood began to course like liquid fire through my veins. I raised the window higher, drew myself to the outer sill, and dropped into the garden. In mad haste I ran down the garden, and climbed over the black paling of Redpost Park.

I dropped safely at the other side of the high wooden fence, and stood still for a few moments panting from the recent and unusual exertion. I tried to catch some sound which would guide me to the spot where that terrible cry had come from : I could here nothing save the hoarse croaking of some frogs in a neighbouring pool.

I could not remain long inactive. I judged that a bend in the carriage way could be soon reached by turning slightly to the left. Without further hesitation I ran swiftly forward in the direction of the carriage way, crashing through the rotten branches which at every step encumbered the moist

ground. Twice I fell headlong, but I experienced no pain.

At last, after traversing a distance of some three or four hundred yards, I reached the carriage way, and as I stopped to take breath I tried to make up my mind where my steps should next take me to. Should I wander through the park, search every spot, until I discovered—something? Should I go to the lodge, or should I fly forward to the house and rouse the dwellers there?

As I stood thus, undecided which way to turn, I thought I heard a groan to the right. Horror-stricken, I ran along the carriage way for some half a dozen yards, and turned a sudden curve in the roadway.

In front of me, in the centre of the grass-grown road, lay the body of a woman—Madeline, my Madeline!

With a cry of anguish I rushed to her, and fell on my knees beside her. Blood was gushing from her mouth, and horrible convulsions were distorting her frame. Her eyes, glassy and restless, were dimly visible as I held my face close to hers, but there was no speculation in the eyes.

Hastily, and with a supreme effort to calm myself, I endeavoured to discover the locality of the wound. She had, I surmised, fallen a victim to some mysterious vengeance: the pistol-shot had been the death-knell of her body, and—my delirium of love was upon me—of my soul.

She lay on her right side as I reached her, but in her convulsive struggles she had twisted her body from my grasp

and turned herself over on her left side. As I tried to lift her from the ground I saw that blood was trickling slowly from her left wrist. Laying her body as gently as possible on the ground, and endeavouring to check her struggles, I seized the wrist. I examined it closely with the little light that the heavens afforded, and saw that some foreign substance, which at the first glance looked like a white splinter, was imbedded in a small punctured wound. Cautiously I drew this splinter from the wound, and holding it close to my eyes, I knew that my fingers grasped a viper's fang.

## CHAPTER IX.

I THREW myself on the ground beside the struggling body of Madeline Viacava, and in a frenzy I tore my handkerchief in half with my teeth and bound the strips tightly about her wrist above and below the wound. Then, with the energy of love and despair, I tried to suck the venom from her wrist, though the condition of Madeline's body showed me that such rough-and-ready treatment was of little avail. I would willingly have given my life to save her; but I saw plainly, excited as I was, that I was only losing time. The bite had been, judging by its effects, of such a deadly nature that I feared no skill on earth could snatch her out of the jaws of death. Still, what man could do I would do.

I rose to my feet, her writhing body clasped in my arms. The quickest way to reach my surgery would be to retrace my steps through the unspeakably hideous park. The thought involuntarily rushed through my burning brain that deadly danger to myself lay in the path I had recently traversed, that beneath those rotting branches writhing

snakes crawled along the ground; but this thought I dismissed as quickly as it came.

My progress through the park was necessarily slow, torturingly slow. It seemed as if I should never reach the dark paling which fringed my garden. But at last, panting and exhausted, I was at the paling, my burden still in my arms, struggling, as it were, to fling itself from my embrace.

I shouted loudly for help, and my cries brought the servants out.

Then consciousness partly left me: I did not faint, but my limbs were leaden, and neither sounds nor sights appealed to my senses. And yet, as I was afterwards told, I carried Madeline's body myself into the surgery. When I laid her down the physical relief of parting from the dead weight of her body recalled my wandering senses. Gazing round the surgery as if the well-known room were some strange spot of earth, some haven of refuge which tempest-tossed I had suddenly and unexpectedly sighted, I tottered towards a chair and sank down upon it. Mrs. Chilcomb was at my side in a moment, holding a bottle of brandy in her hand. She poured out a strong dose into a tumbler, and as I swallowed the fiery liquor I felt that I could nerve myself to attend to my patient until some more trustworthy skill than mine could be offered to her. I sent at once for a neighbouring physician, Dr. Hallworthy, and then I approached Madeline's body. I wiped the blood from her face, and made a fresh examination of the wound.

It was beyond question a snake bite, and a bite of so deadly a nature that I could not imagine what variety of ophidia could have attacked her. I had met with so much success in my former treatment of snake bite that I decided to pursue a similar course of treatment in Madeline's case. At the same time, I must confess, I experienced scarcely a ray of hope. I had little faith in the efficacy of ammonia solution, especially in a case of such an extraordinarily aggravated kind.

The blood had by this time ceased to flow from her mouth. From the nature of the flow, I surmised it had been caused by the rupture of some internal blood vessels, and the mysterious effect of the snake poison had either dried up the sources from which the blood had come or had radically altered the condition of the blood. A profuse salivation had set in; she was frothing at the mouth, and the convulsions were every moment gaining strength. I had by this time cauterised the wound and injected the ammonia, and I was anxiously watching for some alteration in Madeline's symptoms, but my anxious eyes could not detect any change for the better.

Dr. Hallworthy was not long in making his appearance. He was an old-fashioned gentleman with strong proclivities for surgical operation. He had been an army doctor, and had seen some service. Nothing afforded him more pure and sincere pleasure than a difficult operation. He was brusque in his manner, and he wagged a caustic tongue, but

he was at heart the kindest and most generous of men. Yet he was a perfect Nero in surgery ; his unfeigned delight at the prospect of cutting away a tumour or sawing off a leg was something to see—and forget.

When he entered the surgery he must have deemed me mad—I looked wildly insane, I have no doubt—but when I told him what the patient was suffering from he evidently considered me more mad than ever. But there was no denying the unimpeachable testimony of the fang, and with eager curiosity he turned his attention at once to the writhing woman.

I told him what I had done, and he said he could not suggest any other treatment. In fact, he confessed the case was one altogether outside his ken. However, he thought it could be no harm, considering the short time that had elapsed since the poison had entered the wound, to try what effect the cutting away of the part surrounding the wound would have. The poison, he argued, could not have travelled far, the ligatures had been applied so shortly after the accident had occurred. The folly of his suggestion was quite patent to me, for such symptoms as Madeline Viacava exhibited could only be produced by the permeation of the poison through her whole system.

While I was deliberating with myself what way I could put my views before Dr. Hallworthy without causing him gross offence I saw the flash of a knife. I could not for the life of me stay his hand or move my tongue.

With a slowly uttered impressive "Steady" to me I saw the knife imbedded in her wrist. She uttered a shriek, a conscious shriek—the first conscious sound which had escaped from her lips since I had found her lying in Redpost Park.

Dr. Hallworthy suddenly desisted from the operation, and turning to me said in a quiet tone,

"It is too late. It is all over."

## CHAPTER X.

A GOOD deal of what this chapter relates is written from hearsay, and on that account may not be regarded by some as evidence worthy of credence. However, I will relate only what I believe to be true: and I myself consider the following portion of my narrative to be as trustworthy as if it were the relation of my personal experience and observation. I do not intend to give any minute record of my impressions—strong as some of them were, and deeply as one bit into my soul—which the various events made upon me at the time.

For many days after Madeline Viacava's death I lay in a kind of stupor from which nothing could rouse me. These days are a perfect blank in my existence.

A post mortem was held on her body, and there was no longer any doubt that she had actually died of the bite of a venomous, a deadly venomous, reptile. That a reptile possessed of such terrible powers could exist in Redpost Park was scarcely credited, but the incontestable fact remained that Madeline had been bitten to death by one

The impact was withstood for my evidence, but after a fortnight, when I was able to sit up and converse, Dr. Hallworthy decided it would take a long time to restore me to health, and fearing excitement might cause a relapse he certified that for an indefinite period it would be useless to expect my presence at the inquest. Therefore my depositions were taken.

I could, of course, shed no new light on the tragedy. I could only repeat what the reader has already been told. The pistol shot was easily accounted for. The dead woman had no doubt seen the reptile before it attacked her, and had fired at it. The pistol was found near the spot where I had found her in her last agonies. It was an old-fashioned pistol of foreign manufacture, and had "A. V." engraved upon it. Documents which were found in her pocket established the fact that the pistol belonged to her husband, who seemed to lead a wandering life on the Continent.

The authorities deemed it necessary to have Mr. Brabazon examined, but he was certified to be incapable of making even a deposition. Dr. Hallworthy and another physician gave this certificate, and though they were satisfied he was unable to leave his bed—they found him confined to bed—they could not discover what ailed him. The owner of Redpost House lay in a torpor all day—a stupor like that which I had experienced after Madeline's death. Thrice had the doctors entered Redpost House, armed with official authority, and thrice had they left the chamber of Mr.

Brabazon baffled in their endeavour to discover the nature of his ailment.

Dr. Hallworthy afterwards informed me that the examination was a superficial one. Mr. Brabazon was not shamming, of that they were convinced; but they had taken Mr. Ashcroft's word for a good deal.

Mr. Ashcroft was then subpoenaed to the inquest, which had been twice adjourned; but his evidence was of little value in clearing up the mystery of the reptile. His master, he stated, had been a confirmed invalid from his birth, and had been for over twenty years in his sole and undivided charge. \*He had occasional intervals of soundness, but robust health he had never enjoyed. In one of those intervals he had been travelling abroad, and had met with the husband of the dead woman, who had endeavoured to extort large sums of money from him, and who had a few months prior to her death announced his intention of personally pressing a demand for money, which Mr. Brabazon had ignored. He, the witness, did not, he confessed, believe in the existence of venomous reptiles in Redpost Park, but Mr. Brabazon, he was sure, would be glad if the authorities would take the matter into their hands, and ascertain if reptiles really did exist in the grounds.

This was the gist of Mr. Ashcroft's evidence. The examination and cross-examination having been completed, I was told, a deep quiet upon him, and he answered the questions put to him in a manner which was a good deal

of sympathy for him and for the parent whose life had been, it now appeared, almost an unbroken chain of bodily unsoundness.

The newspapers were filled with accounts of the extraordinary tragedy, and the history of Redpost Park for half a century was by degrees laid bare to the public. I cannot offer here the various dishes of horrors which were from time to time set before a public which ever craves for horrible diet in print, and seems by feeding to grow more hungry. Mrs. Chilcomb was in great request at this time, and many other "oldest inhabitants" found themselves the subject of enviable, or unenviable, notoriety.

The late owner of Redpost Park, by all accounts, had been a monster of iniquity. Time may mellow a man's faults, but the mellowing process ceases when it becomes for some reason the fashion to rake up the dead bones of some forgotten scandal. A reaction then sets in. If Archibald Brabazon were all that rumour alleged him to have been, if he had committed, if he had even contemplated, half the diabolical deeds which memories going back for half a century placed to his credit the only mystery to me was that the infernal spirits had not envied his powers, and carried him to Avernus in delirious wonder, ere the hands of the common hangman had pinioned him.

Of course the various stories which some of the newspapers gave to the world were laughed at by sensible folk; but there is seldom smoke without fire, and it was ascertained beyond

question that in many of the charges laid against the dead and gone owner of Redpost Park there was a substratum of truth. His elder brother had disappeared in an unaccountable manner; and Archibald had been arrested on a charge of having murdered his wife, but there had been no straightforward evidence against him in either of these cases. It was also true that at one period of his career he had out of pure devilry let loose in the park a number of reptiles, and the authorities being made aware of the fact had been obliged to seize upon the park and rid it of this horrible pestilence. But again, Archibald Brabazon had had the laugh against his accusers, for it was ascertained that every reptile had been harmless, its venom glands having been extracted. Then came stories of the mad, drunken doctor, who had been the constant and only male companion of Archibald Brabazon, and who had, it appeared, hanged himself from one of the trees in the park. The ridiculous charges which were made against the pair of miscreants—miscreants they undoubtedly were—Archibald Brabazon and Dr. Anthony Bletsoe, could only cause me to smile, though an uneasy shudder attended that smile.

There is no occasion—it would help my narrative nothing to record here the various tales, one more horrible than the other, which were told of those two men long since summoned to the final tribunal. Some of them dwell vividly in my memory still, and some I have succeeded in banishing to the realms of oblivion. But though I have endeavoured to

close upon these the doors of forgetfulness, the doors will now and then open for an instant, and a fetid breath will rise in the air until I stagger as if from the stroke of an iron hand.

The fang which I had extracted from Madeline Viacava's wound was the subject of much heated controversy. It was beyond doubt a viperine fang, but no authoritative voice could decide what the nature of its original owner was. All were agreed that the serpent must have been an uncommonly large one, but the fang belonged to no known order of serpent. It was finally decided, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a compromise was arrived at—that the fang was one of abnormal growth and formation, some natural eccentricity.

Redpost Park was scoured from end to end, but nothing more venomous than a colony of toads was discovered. The surmises as to the whereabouts of the reptile which had bitten Madeline so savagely were various. The general opinion was that it had escaped from the park after the tragedy. This idea naturally caused a good deal of uneasiness, and nervous folk in my suburb avoided the lonely lanes and the few open spaces which still existed in the neighbourhood.

In the search for the reptile in Redpost Park one discovery was made which for a while diverted people's minds from the mystery of Madeline Viacava's death. The skeleton of a full-

grown man was dug up almost in the centre of the park, in the vicinity of the tree from which Doctor Bletsoe had hanged himself. There were no means of identifying the skeleton. It was duly examined, and the skull was found to have been almost cleft in twain as if from the blow of some heavy instrument. It was currently believed the skeleton was that of Ralph Brabazon, the elder brother of the diabolical Archibald, and that his mysterious disappearance had been at length accounted for.

## CHAPTER XI.

ABOUT the middle of October I was able to leave the house, but I was still feeble and unfit for work. Dr. Hallworthy advised me to go to some quiet south coast watering place and take a long holiday. I selected Broadstairs, and thither I went.

The weather was now mild and bright. The months of September and October seemed to have changed places. There were no harsh winds, and no rain fell during the first fortnight of my stay at Broadstairs.

I took apartments in the terrace facing the sea, and the freshness of the sea air, the brightness of the atmosphere, the quiet of the sleepy little town—the whole change from the mad unrest of that awful night when I dragged her body through the park—revived me bodily and mentally. Whether the torpor in which I had so long lain had affected me or not I am unable to determine satisfactorily, but I know that since my recovery from it a change had come over my mental condition. Perhaps it was not so much a change as a distinct

and emphasised continuation of the state of mind into which I had gradually drifted since my meeting with Mr. Brabazon.

I have mentioned the fact that I had succeeded in working myself out of the slough of despondency in which I had grovelled—I cannot say lived, when I look back upon it now—for many years. My mind had been growing daily more clear, and my distorted mental vision had been improving before the tragedy in Redpost Park had disturbed me; but there was a lurking dimness ever present, an uneasy dread that I might at any moment totter into an abyss of despair from which nothing could rescue me. Now I seemed to see everything with an eye as clear and healthy as man could desire; there were no lurking shadows in my path. This delightful change was all the more wonderful to me when I reflected how madly I had for one brief hour loved that strange woman, how the life went out of my body when I heard that she was no more. I had loved her passionately; I cherished her memory still; but the loss did not make me hate mankind. I did not allow myself to brood too much over her tragic fate. She never, I now knew, could have been anything but a memory to me. I found some small grain of comfort in that reflection.

I tried to banish from my mind the charges with which Mr. Ashcroft had attempted to blacken the character of the dead woman. I cannot say that I succeeded altogether in this endeavour, for Mr. Ashcroft was a man in whose

countenance truth was clearly indexed. I could only account for his statement by supposing he had misjudged Madeline, that he had been purposely deceived about her conduct by Mr. Brabazon. It must be that Mr. Brabazon had wronged her husband cruelly and had endeavoured to shift the blame to other shoulders. I hated him when this thought came uppermost. And yet at times I could not dismiss from my memory the cold glitter, almost cruel in its coldness, which I had seen in her eyes when first she disclosed her face to me in the study.

One afternoon during the third week of my stay in Broadstairs I went for a walk over the cliffs to Ramsgate. Returning to Broadstairs I felt a little tired, and when about a mile from the outskirts of the town I sat down on a grassy slope near the edge of the cliffs. The wind was blowing in from the sea, and the salt-laden air soothed and refreshed me. I felt a glow of health and contentment coursing through my veins as I sat and gazed at the heaving waters.

I had been sitting in blissful peace for about half an hour when I observed that I was not alone. A shadow seemed to overhang me, and looking over my shoulder I saw a man seating himself on the slope behind me, a few yards distant. I moved my body slowly until I almost faced the man. The motion had been almost involuntary : I could not tell why I had moved. Apparently the stranger was not taking any notice of me. He sat with his head slightly averted as if he were looking for the approach of some one from Broad-

stairs. He was a dark-haired, powerfully-built man; with a nose long and sharp in profile. He had a thick, black moustache, and a chin which receded visibly but was of remarkable squareness. He was dressed in tightly fitting, well-made clothes, and he wore a soft brown hat slouched over his brows. A cigar was between his lips.

There was something of the foreigner in his appearance, but I judged him to be an Englishman who had travelled much.

Suddenly he turned and looked straight at me. His eyes, dark and luminous eyes, caught mine as I glanced swiftly at him, and, with a spasmodic motion of the lips which disclosed a glistening set of white, even teeth, he said in a low, soft voice,

"I think I am addressing Dr. Emanuel. Is it not so?"

Had a thunderbol fallen from the violet sky above I could not have been more astonished and alarmed. What could he know of me? What could he want with me? I was not acquainted with any one in Broadstairs, and certainly this man was an utter stranger to me. However, I saw no reason why I should not answer his question.

"Yes, I am Dr. Emanuel," I said quietly. "You have the advantage of me; I do not recognise you."

"No," he said, blowing a whiff of smoke seaward, "we have never met until this evening."

His nonchalance irritated me. Though there was nothing offensive in his words there was a swaggering offence in his

voice and manner. I could not hide my irritation, so I exclaimed hastily and sharply, "I presume you have something to say to me. If that is the case, you had better say it quickly, for I am about to retire for the evening."

"Not so fast," he murmured. "Not so fast, dear Doctor. Your presumption is quite correct. I *have* something to say to you."

I was not in the least alarmed now. I had learned a lesson in the art of commanding myself. My old nervousness, if it did still exist, was dormant, but I was annoyed at the impudently aggressive swagger of the man.

"Say it, please—at once." I uttered the words with distinct emphasis.

"I am in no hurry, I assure you. The night is very young, scarcely born, in fact; and I think slowly, Doctor; therefore my speech is slow. My name is—at least," with a grin and another spasmodic movement of his mouth—"the name I am known by is Antonio Viacava. Signor Viacava, if you like that better."

I felt my heart palpitating wildly. I tried to speak, but my tongue clave to my palate. *Her* husband!

"I see," with a shrug of his shoulders, "that you are surprised, struck all-of-a-heap, as you would say. Yes, Antonio Viacava is my name—at least my adopted name. I pass for an Italian—somewhat like your Mr. Weller, my knowledge of Italy and of Italians is extensive and peculiar—and yet I am an Englishman. You see," with another shrug of his

shoulders and a gesture of the hands, "I am candid with you, Doctor. Charminglly candid."

"So I perceive. But," my voice was thick and unsteady, "with what object, pray, do you seek me out?"

"That will appear presently. There is no hurry, Doctor. I do not like to carry on conversations of a private nature in a room, or I should have done myself the honour of calling upon you to-day. You have an old proverb: 'Stone walls have ears;' there are no ears here but our own."

His words brought that unpleasant fact home to me suddenly. The cliffs were quite deserted. I did not offer to speak. I had nothing to say, and I knew Signor Viacava would detain me until he had explained himself. He went on in the same cold, measured tone,

"Of course I sought you out. When one wishes to speak to a friend—permit me to call you a friend—he naturally seeks him out. I called at your house in the great city. You were not there. You were in Broadstairs, a good lady informed me—your housekeeper, no doubt. Therefore I am in Broadstairs. It is simple, is it not?"

He paused as if in expectation of a reply, so I answered him, "Quite simple from your point of view, no doubt. But why do you seek me out? Do you wish to consult me professionally?"

"In one sense, yes, and in one sense, no. I am, I trust, in perfect health bodily, but, like Macbeth, I want you to

minister to a mind—perhaps I should say a purse—discased. No, no ; not madness,” he went on, with a laugh, if that spasmodic action of the mouth could be called a laugh ; “ I am as sane as yourself.”

An echo of Madeline Viacava’s words !

“ I am troubled,” he continued, “ about many things ; money for one, as I have already hinted, delicately hinted, I hope.”

I drew my purse promptly from my pocket.

Signor Viacava threw himself back and burst into loud laughter.

“ Oh, dear no,” he cried ; “ your little purse, Doctor, cannot cure my ills. All the same I thank you very much. The impulse was generous—noble ; but my needs require the assistance of a modern Fortunatus. Thousands, my dear sir ; thousands, my dear sir ! ”

“ Thousands ! ” I echoed in surprise.

“ Yes ; but not of yours, Doctor.”

“ Why, then, mention the fact that you needed money ? ”

“ Because through you I mean to obtain it.”

“ Through me ? ”

“ Yes ; through you. Listen to me, Doctor. You need not be alarmed. I am not a professional mendicant. I am simply a gentleman slightly out at elbows. Metaphorically, of course,” he added, with a laugh, caressing the sleeve of his well-fitting coat. “ I require a sum of money. Let us say ten or twenty thousand pounds. A friend of yours is

rich. He must pay the sum I shall decide upon demanding."

"I do not see the logical inference."

"No. Presently you will. Be patient, dear Doctor."

He flung away his cigar and proceeded to light another. He had by this moved—glided would perhaps be a ridiculous word to apply to such a mass of flesh—along the cliff until he was close beside me. So imperceptible had been this movement on the part of Signor Viacava—at no time had I been able to convince myself that he was actually approaching more closely to me, or I should have instantly risen to my feet—that I felt powerless to protest against his actions. There would be no object served now in exhibiting any traces, assumed or otherwise, of fear; and, after all, I had no reason to be alarmed, nor was I in reality alarmed.

There was indeed no menace in his unimpassioned face or in his somewhat languid gestures. I could only say that I did not like the man; fear I did not experience. He could scarcely mean harm. It could not possibly serve any object of his, so far as I could imagine, to injure me. Was he not contemplating that I should assist him in some demand for money? My assistance he of course should not have if his demand was not just. I had not the slightest intention of converting myself into an agent for the levying of black mail. Had I been sitting in a room with Viacava, or in a place where people were moving to and fro, no question of alarm would have disturbed me. But the edge of the cliff

was distant only a few yards; and we were alone. And the sight of means to do ill deeds might have some influence over the actions of my companion. When I look back now upon the thoughts which coursed through my brain as I found Signor Viacava sitting so uncomfortably close to me, I fancy I was more anxious than I should like to have admitted to myself to learn something about the connection between his dead wife and Mr. Brabazon; and, as a corollary, to obtain a clue to that mystery of Redpost Park. When Signor Viacava's cigar was alight he said,

"Mr. Brabazon is rich—enormously wealthy. I am temporarily poor—deucedly poor. I have a legitimate claim against him; therefore there should be no need on his part for hesitation."

"The inference assumes a more logical aspect now; but why tell me all this? Why not go to Mr. Brabazon and lay your claim before him. Why not write to him?"

"It would be useless for me to endeavour to see Mr. Brabazon. I am not in a position to storm his fortress. He sees no one. He is a recluse of the most pronounced type." His glistening teeth again showed themselves under the black moustache. "You are the only privileged being beyond his Mentor, Ashcroft. To write to him would be useless. The same Mentor examines his correspondence and would not permit him to read my letters. Perhaps you now see why I select you as my ambassador. Do you not?"

The cool effrontery of the man was amazing; but there

was an echo in his words of his wife's words which softened my anger. Parrying his question I said, "Surely you could contrive to see Mr. Brabazon without my aid?"

"What if I did not wish to see him? What if I should not care to stand in his presence even, for thousands of pounds?" There was more energy in his tone than he had previously allowed to creep into it.

"You amaze me. He is an ordinary human being amenable to reason," I said. "He is not a ravenous wolf seeking whom he may devour."

"He is worse—he is something more terrible!" said Signor Viacava, with that horrible opening of the mouth followed by a short, quick snap of his white teeth.

I could only stare at him in bewilderment. His face was as impassive as ever, but there was a gleam in his dark eyes which made me feel distinctly uncomfortable, and I determined to try and humour Signor Viacava a little.

"Might I ask how I am to ascertain if the claim you wish to press upon Mr. Brabazon is a just one?"

"You may ask, of course," he replied politely, "but I shall require a moment's deliberation with myself before I decide to answer your question."

He puffed at his cigar for a few moments, and with a movement which brought his body a little closer to mine, he said: "I will ask *you* a question. I will put a case to you. Suppose a man were to murder your wife, ought not that man to consider he was making a good bargain if the bereaved widow consented to take a sum of money and be silent.

Would not the burial of a hangman's rope be dirt cheap at twenty thousand pounds to Mr. Brabazon?"

"In God's name what connection is there between hangmen's ropes and Mr. Brabazon?"

"A close connection, if I choose to speak!"

"You are talking utter nonsense. Do you know what your wife died of?"

"I know what killed my wife—who murdered my wife."

We were close to one another now. His hot breath was like a furnace blast.

"Have you read the account of the inquest?"

"I have read the account of the inquest."

"And you talk of murder?"

"And I talk of murder."

"Are you aware that it was I—I—who found your wife in Redpost Park; I who discovered the viper's fang in her wrist; I who tried with all my power to snatch her from the jaws of death?"

He laughed a coarse brutal laugh and said,

"Yes—I am aware of it all. Your hypodermic injections of ammonia and the rest. You might as well have been injecting soapsuds. Look here, doctor, we must not mince matters any longer. Let my wife be. Will you do my will? Will you place in Brabazon's hands a letter from me?"

"I do not know. What if I decline?"

"This, by God!" he yelled; and the point of a glistening knife was placed against my breast, and one arm of Signor Viacava was wound tightly round my struggling body.

## CHAPTER XII.

I WAS almost paralysed with terror, not so much through fear of the glistening knife, as from the suddenness of the attack. However, I recovered myself in an incredibly short space of time, and looked fixedly into Signor Viacava's unspeculative eyes. Neither of us spoke. He held me—hugged me—with his left arm, while his right hand clasped the knife which was pointed at my heart. No perceptible motion disturbed our bodies. His face had quickly resumed its impassive expression, and with a supreme effort to control myself I pondered what I should say or do. I felt I was dealing with a swaggerer and a coward, but I was no match physically for the man. However, I could lose nothing by delay. Every moment that went by travelled in my favour, for there was a possibility that a stranger might arrive on the scene and disturb the plans of Signor Viacava. Possibly the same notion occurred to him as soon as it occurred to me, for, scarcely opening his teeth, he hissed through them, "Quick, my friend. Your answer?"

"I am considering," I replied, with a flourish of dramatics that astonished myself.

"You are cool, 'pon my soul," said Viācāva, with a short, rasping laugh. "I did not give you credit for so much coolness. But you are foolish," he added quickly. "If you think I am not in earnest you are woefully mistaken. Your answer?"

"What if it is no?"

"I have told you. See," he cried, nodding towards the knife, a surgical knife. "I shall be compelled to bury it in your breast, and then—well, then," with another of his short laughs, "I shall fling you over the cliff."

"You spoke a short time ago of hangman's ropes. Have you no fear of one?"

"Bah. That is the thought which makes you so infernally cool, is it?" A short pause. "You do not answer. Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is not. What matter? Know, my friend, I have considered well my actions. I did not quite expect you would have held out so long, or that you would have put yourself into such a devilish unpleasant position. I was informed you were a nervous man. Your nerves are of steel. For that I admire you. But if you dare me, as sure as the sky is above us you shall go over the cliff, with a knife in your breast lest the fall should render you uncomfortable. Suicide, the wiseacres will find it, as they found 'natural causes' for my wife. 'The odd Doctor'—you wince at that—has committed suicide at last. What can be more

natural? And then there will be a beautiful rider to the verdict—'temporary insanity!' See, Doctor, you had best be quick. I ask but little, but what I ask must be done, or——"

He stopped, shook his head, and tilted it on one side, his eyes travelling to the edge of the cliff. The lengthy speech he had delivered had evidently cost him an effort, for he panted like one after a quick run. I was affected but little by his words, though I was convinced the man meant everything he had said. Still, life is sweet, and after all I was asked to do but little—merely to deliver a letter. A revulsion of feeling came swiftly over me. I had made a fuss about very little. This was positively the light in which I looked upon the matter. The imminent peril I was in scarce disturbed me. I did not underrate the danger, but that night I was so near death that I had unconsciously braced myself up to despise it. The only fear which possessed me was the horror of a struggle; but the thought did not come home to me with full force until I had said, "I consent." Then, as Signor Viacava unwound his arm, and taking a leather sheath from his breast-pocket, slowly forced the knife into its sheath, I was sick almost to vomiting. A dizziness, which I conquered only by an enormous effort of will, came over me. Viacava, silently and leisurely, replaced the knife inside his coat. He was evidently unaware of any change in my demeanour, for the first words he uttered were: "You are the coolest man it has ever been my luck to fall in with. I should like to grasp your hand."

I shook my head. I had not yet sufficient strength to control my voice.

"You despise me. You are wrong. I am not a man to be despised ; but you are brave, 'pon my soul." A series of short quick laughs shook his big frame. "Now that we are reconciled to each other I shall take the liberty of placing my letter in your care."

I rose to my feet, and with a visible tremor in my voice I observed :

"We had best continue our conversation on foot. We can arrange the little that is to be arranged as we walk back to Broadstairs."

I still felt a trifle giddy—an uncomfortable feeling, as if the cliffs palpitated, as if a slight shock of earthquake was disturbing them, was upon me ; but by the time Viacava had risen to his feet I had conquered in a great measure the unsteadiness in my gait, and I walked inland somewhat briskly.

"I am not a rapid walker," said Viacava, as he quickly overtook me. "A little more slowly, if you please. You are a wonderful man. Nerves ! Well, I'll back 'the odd Doctor' for nerves against the sturdiest old campaigner living."

It horrified me to reflect that I was treating the matter so coolly ; but I knew that my life hung upon my self-possession. It is said that a nervous, timid being can in a moment of deadly peril often succeed in commanding a greater

measure of self-possession than one who is accustomed to danger, and is naturally brave. I felt the truth of that statement as I walked rapidly alongside Signor Viacava. Another sensation I experienced was an intense desire to fling myself on the dastardly ruffian and tear his heart from his body, and had I been a stronger man physically, the impulse might have mastered me, and my hands might have been dyed with his blood.

Perhaps this is a strange statement to make. It may seem incredible that, roused as were my slumbering passions, I could restrain myself simply through fear of danger to my own body, I who had been so indifferent to danger but a few minutes previously. But I think I can account for the seeming incongruity. I believe my temperament to be on the surface a quiet one, but deep beneath that quiet surface there is a fire—sometimes slumbering, sometimes turbulent—which an extraordinary disturbance may bring to the surface.

I take it that the average man who has been trained to live in peace with his fellow-man is made up—even that nations are made up—of similar materials. Sometimes the fire bursts through the veneer-like surface, and changes irretrievably the whole nature of the man, just as a tremendous eruption of the crust of mother earth changes the face of nature, swallows up great tracts of land, and raises new continents where land had not been known previously. Sometimes the crust is hard and the quickening fire fails to burst through, and rumbles along underneath, disturbing the sur-

face for a moment, and then all is quiet and serene once more, and nothing remains but an uneasy memory of the danger. Sometimes a safety valve exists and the fire finds a quiet and easy outlet; and though the surface is not altered out of recognition, there is an ever-present danger, the knowledge that another volcano of devouring, uncontrollable flame is nigh at hand. Thus, to my mind, are we like portions of the earth we inhabit, subject to the same influences living as the dust into which we shall return when life is no longer with us. To some, as to favoured spots of earth, the fire never makes itself known. With some it lies so deep that they live their lives, if not in ignorance, at least in doubt of its existence.

I judge myself to be possessed of that class of mental organism—not by any means the most ordinary class, although at first thought it might seem to be so—which in times of unusual disturbance finds a safety valve in passion almost uncontrollable. It would, perhaps, in a more youthful mind, and with similar disturbing forces, be wholly uncontrollable, but long-standing habits and the exercise of powerful restraints sometimes succeed in putting a break on nature herself. To a certain, and, of course, a limited extent I had succeeded in tempering the force of that fire which on occasions, rare occasions, it must be admitted, sought to overwhelm and consume the crust of passivity, forming, under ordinary circumstances, my mental surface.

The first introspective vision which had been vouchsafed

to me—the first peep I had been granted of the slumbering fires within me—was when my eyes had first lighted on a corpse in the dissecting-room. I had instantaneously experienced a savage glow of satisfaction as I beheld the knife cutting through the dead, yellow flesh ; and this sensation had so overwhelmed me, so wrought upon my nervous organisation, that had I not fainted I would have seized the first lethal weapon at hand and hacked the body mercilessly. When I had recovered from my fainting fit there was nothing remaining of that savage desire but a vague and awful memory. When the first great sorrow and despair, which had cast a shadow over a part of my life, come to me, in my anger I could scarcely restrain myself from wreaking vengeance on the man who had basely come between me and the woman who, for his sake, had spurned me ; and with horror I can still recollect the plans and plots I had brooded over and revelled in while the wild passion of revenge held sway in my heart ; and then as the fever-fit of revenge vanished what agony had been mine at the memory of my thoughts and desires ! For years had I been haunted by that memory ; and the dread of myself, the fierce effort to keep my slumbering passions under control, had left its mark upon me, made me the morbid creature that I had been until my intercourse with Mr. Brabazon had lifted a corner of the shadow from me—until I had felt assured that the fires were dead within me, that I had been foolishly weak in supposing I should again lose control over myself.

I have already endeavoured to describe the effects which my initial effort to close the doors on the memories of the past had upon me. Perhaps it cannot truly be called an effort, for at first I had no fixed intention of resuming intercourse of the ordinary kind with my fellow man ; but when I plainly saw that my presence was welcome in Redpost Park, the determination had seized me to try and make one final struggle against my habit of reserve, which had almost grown to be second nature, and to go forth into the world with the conviction I possessed a fairly sound mind in a fairly sound body.

It may be remembered that I had succeeded beyond my expectations in this resolution. I am confident that I should gradually and steadily have grown to be one of the most ordinary and commonplace of mortals, purged from passion, relieved of memories and of the fearful anticipations which had so long weighed me down and made me the eccentric miserable creature I had been. But little time was allowed me by remorseless fate. The tragedy in the park, the strange and awful death of the woman who had ravished my senses, had proved that my self-confidence had been misplaced. Madeline's death-cry was a lightning-flash which rent asunder the walls which held the fire, and I still shudder as I remember the inhuman desires that seemed to consume me in that moment which elapsed between her death-cry and the fainting fit which succeeded it. Then nature again had been merciful, and the long torpor in which I had lain had restored and

revivified me. Though my body was weak after my illness, my brain had grown stronger, and I knew that the right had triumphed once more. The only disturbing element was the memory of what had passed : dread of the future did not exist as had formerly been the case ; but when I read and heard many of the stories of the devilish orgies which were said to have taken place at Redpost House while Archibald Brabazon and Dr. Bletsoe resided there, I grew uneasy as I thought that had I, like Dr. Bletsoe, fallen into the hands of a masterful and diabolical mind such as Archibald Brabazon must have possessed, I might have grown as reckless and as diabolical as the erst physician in Redpost House. I might have become a murderer's pliant tool, a murderer, perhaps. I might have hanged myself from a tree as Dr. Bletsoe had hanged himself.

The struggle with the worser half of my nature had raged within me as I sat on the cliffs with Viacava, his knife against my breast, and my better nature had conquered, but in the struggle it had grown weak, and as I started to walk towards Broadstairs with Viacava I was merely an animal—human passions, the higher aspirations of man, had scarcely a place within me : the animal desire to strike at my foe was chained down by the dread, the purely animal dread, of destruction.

This has been a long digression, unpardonably long, I fear ; but perhaps my actions might be wholly unaccountable if my mental mechanism was not laid bare for examination.

As I walked on, scarcely heeding what Viacava said to

me, I felt that I was quickly relapsing into my ordinary frame of mind. The knowledge cheered me, but at the same time I knew I should have to keep watch and guard over my actions and sayings, for if I exhibited any traces of my normal timidity I would have had but a poor chance with Signor Viacava. It was my coolness which had saved my life. He had been cowed by it. If I had been weak and faltering I should have been hurled over the cliff with his knife in my breast. The man, I judged, was one of those abnormal beings who delight in murder for murder's sake, but who are more easily cowed than the most cowardly of beasts. If you run from a snarling mongrel it bites ; if you stand firmly it slinks away.

Signor Viacava, finding I was not now in a mood for conversation, kept his peace for a while and puffed vigorously at his cigar. While the silence lasted I was speculating on the untoward chain of circumstances which had sent this man across my path, and I was trying to account to myself for the existence of such a nature as his. I am a strong believer in the effect of hereditary tendencies: of course I am not singular in this respect, but I have a belief that heredity has a more marked influence over mental and physical conditions than is ordinarily accredited to it. If I am specially interested in a patient's ills I make minute inquiries into the habits and diseases, so far as information of an accurate character can be obtained, of his parents.

My experience, limited though it has been, has convinced

me that too much reliance is placed upon the accepted theory that hereditary tendencies are transmitted more markedly from the maternal than from the paternal side. Especially in the case of diseases which affect the intellect I have found that such diseases are more readily transmitted from father to son than from mother to son. The same rule I would apply to idiosyncrasies which can scarcely be dignified with the term disease, and I have observed that there is often a tendency in the son to exaggerate the peculiarities of the mental or physical constitution of his father. Hysteria plays a part so important in the comedy or tragedy of woman's life that I have never been able to satisfy myself thoroughly where the effects of heredity in woman stop and where hysteria steps in.

Quite suddenly I felt I could account for most of what was strange and hitherto unaccountable in the character of Viacava. He was the product of at least two generations of men who had held human life—not their own miserable life, for he who is reckless of the lives of others is usually possessed of the instinct of self-preservation in an accentuated degree—in contempt.

I suppose it will be deemed absurd that I should hastily arrive at important conclusions respecting the character and antecedents of Signor Viacava. I knew but little of the man. My acquaintance with him was scarcely an hour old: still my mind was made up. Had a stethoscope telegraphed the physical condition of his heart I could not, as a fairly

competent physician, doubt my ability to read aright the message telegraphed to me : I did not doubt my ability to read the message which had been mysteriously telegraphed to me while his arm had held me in its close embrace on the cliffs.

More than once in moments of extreme nervous tension had I endeavoured to project my spirit into the mental organism of another. The effort had always been a supreme one, and when the momentary excitement had died away I had invariably found myself in a weak and tremulous condition of body and mind ; but the conviction had always remained that my effort had been at least partially successful.

With a mind of stronger fibre than my own I could, I knew, have little or no chance of success ; but Signor Viacava was, I doubted not, mentally as weak as he was physically strong, and therefore the conviction now remained with me that I had been successful in attempting to read aright the message mysteriously transmitted from him to me.

The silence was growing irksome. My companion was, however, the first to speak.

"I have been deceived in you, Doctor," he said. "Quite deceived. And for that reason I think it would be better that we should come to a clear understanding about many things. I do not like to be deceived in my estimate of a man."

"You have my word about your letter. What more do you want ? Do you doubt me ?"

"Not in the least, my good sir. Not in the least. *But*," he emphasised the word, "I wish to tell you more of myself than you already know."

"I have no wish to hear anything concerning you." Although I could not help saying this - Vancava's patronising manner irritated me to an unreasonable extent - yet in my heart I could not repress a desire to ascertain if my estimate of his character would be confirmed by his own admissions.

"Probably not, but I desire to impart the information. It will convince you—if there does exist in your mind any lingering doubt as to the earnestness of my purpose, and the dangers which would hourly lie in your path if you decided hereafter to thwart my purposes—it will convince you that I am a very ugly customer to trifle with."

"You do not impress me, signor ; but if you are anxious to convince me of your diabolical prowess my ears are open to hear your tale."

"Flippant, Doctor. Flippant; but charming. Your coolness amazes me. I am interested in you—I may go farther and say I admire you. We should work well in double harness."

"Bah!" I exclaimed with unrestrained disgust. "If you have nothing better than this to tell me it were wiser to hold your tongue."

"Patience, Doctor. My thoughts come slowly. Have I not told you so? But to business." With a sudden show of energy he flung his cigar away, and buried his hands deep in

the pockets of his coat. "I told you my name was an assumed name. I shall tell why I changed it. My father committed an act—or rather, it was committed for him—which covered with shame a name that had never smelt over-sweetly in the nostrils of good people. He was found one day dangling from a tree, with a rope round his neck.

The statement sent a spasm of horror through me. Again I felt that I was growing faint and sick; but fortunately I succeeded in controlling my emotions before Viacava had time to observe me. He had stopped abruptly as he told me pithily this horrible story, and for a few minutes neither of us showed any inclination to resume our walk or conversation.

"An unpleasant reminiscence, Doctor," he said cheerily. It was now too dark to observe the facial gestures which accompanied his words, but I knew his white teeth were grinning at me.

"Very unpleasant," I observed. "But let us resume our walk. It is growing late."

Again we went forward, and there was silence for some minutes.

"My father," he said abruptly, "was found to have committed suicide. Twelve intelligent jurymen decided he was temporarily insane. He did not commit suicide. He was not temporarily insane. He was murdered."

"How do you know? On the face of it, it seems probable that when a man is found hanging from a tree he has com-

mitted suicide. A murderer usually does nothing to his victim. In the first place it would be a very dangerous proceeding on the part of the murderer—"

"You are excited, Doctor," interrupted my companion. "But listen a little longer to me. My father was not an ordinary man: his murderer was not an ordinary man: the scene of the hanging was not an ordinary place: the murderer was a little erratic in his views of human life—so was my father, for a matter of that—so am I, for a matter of that. The murderer was eccentric, I have said. He had already put into practice a very ordinary and clumsy method of disposing of a person who stood in his way. In fact, near the spot where my father was hanged he had struck his brother on the head with a hatchet and buried him."

"Good God!" I exclaimed, "you are referring to Dr. Bletsoe and Archibald Brabazon!"

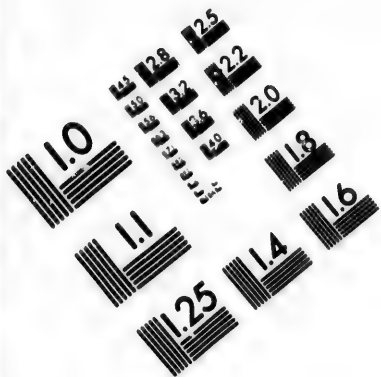
"I am, Doctor. Now we have roused the gentle Dr. Emanuel, have we. So—so. Dr. Bletsoe was my father. Archibald Brabazon probably drugged him first, but he certainly hanged my father."

"I cannot go further with you—leave me, for heaven's sake! You will kill me with horror!"

"It would not suit me to kill you—now. You will be useful to me."

"Bury your knife in my heart!" I cried, fiercely tearing open my coat and standing in front of Vaneval, "but do not tell me you wish to make me useful to you. I would sooner





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die now than live, with the knowledge that you—you were to cross my path again."

A triumphant leer was in his face as I stood before him in my agony. "Pish, Doctor!" he said. "You *are* odd. We should be friends, brothers."

"I cannot, I will not listen to you," I cried, placing my fingers in my ears.

And then I sank to the ground, a surging, sickening noise deafening me.

### CHAPTER XIII.

VIACAVA—I will call him by that name—was bending over me. I could not tell what he was doing or what he was saying. I would have welcomed the first sharp touch of the knife as a blessed relief, but I knew the relief was denied me.

The first words I could distinguish were,

“Doctor, doctor, this is ridiculous. I owe you no grudge. It is not my intent to harm you. Be sensible—be cool.” And then I felt his strong arms seize me and lift me to my feet.

We had reached the outskirts of the quiet little town, now indulging in peaceful sleep. Viacava helped, or rather dragged, me along the terrace facing the sea until we reached a seat; and here he sat me down, and with a rough kind of tenderness tried to place me in a comfortable position in the corner of the seat. I now seemed to care little what might befall me. My feeling of horror of Viacava had changed into a feeling of negative dislike or distrust—nothing more. I dimly remembered who he was; the story he had told me

of his father's murder was like a dim and distant vision—a mere recollection of a hideous dream.

Viacava doubtless saw that I was in no condition that night for further conversation. He sat patiently by me for a long time—I had no knowledge whether the time was half an hour or half a night—and then with a sigh he rose, and seizing me gently by the shoulders said, "I have alarmed you, Doctor, though I had no intention of frightening you out of your wits with my story. Indeed, it is a puzzle to me how a cool hand like you should be so disturbed by the story of a man who must have been unknown to you."

His words roused me. I lifted my head and gazed at the sky. A young moon, a pale luminous fang, trembled in the heavens. I dropped my head on my breast, and dimly I saw with my mind's eye the well-met pair in Redpost House concocting abominable plots, revelling in their diabolical wickedness; a brother slaying his brother and burying the body with rampant fearful eagerness; a corpse dangling from a tree in Redpost Park; the glare of a yellow eye from a window; a black figure on a couch in a sombre room; a body lying on a carriage way in convulsive agony; a figure, the figure now standing over me, holding a knife to my breast; all were before me and seemed—I remember the vision well—as phosphorescent articulations, connected but incomplete, of the vertebræ of a monster whose structure puzzled me, interested me, horrified me.

Pressing my hands to my temples I rose to my feet, and

with tottering steps walked to the house where my apartments were.

Signor Viacava stood beside me until I had opened the door with a latchkey, and then in a low voice he murmured:

“To-morrow at noon on the jetty. Be not afraid, Doctor. I will not harrow you with what is passed and gone. But the present and the future have some interests in common for you and me. Good night, and pleasant dreams!”

#### CHAPTER XIV.

I PASSED a quiet, dreamless night, but arose next day feeling a little weary and giddy. I drew up my window-blind and saw that the sun was high in the heavens ; and not till then did any thought of the events which had overwhelmed me on the previous night occur to me.

With nervous haste I dressed myself, and then I went down to breakfast, endeavouring with all my might to dismiss the pseudo-Italian from my mind. The effort almost stupefied me, and at last, with the abandonment which I fancy may seize one who, when the first shock of despair is over, is rolling down a steep incline to destruction, has the full knowledge that death is hovering over him, that no human effort can save him, that in one swift moment he will have lived this life out, I abandoned myself to Viacava.

In a moment I found myself exulting in the devilry which the mere memory of the man set coursing through my veins. There recurred to me with bewildering force and strange distinctness a story I had heard of a criminal who with

rope round his neck has jumped from the gallows, a cry of fiendish exultation bursting from him, paralysing the seething multitude assembled to witness his death agonies.

Not only had I lost all my dread of Viacava, but I burned with the desire to be once more in his presence, to watch the spasmodic working of his mouth, to gaze into his unimpassioned eyes, to behold his glistening teeth, the gestures of his hands, as he doled out to me some dainty scraps of horror.

In this mood I went quickly out of doors, and in this mood I reached the jetty. Viacava was seated there—we had the jetty to ourselves. I approached him with quickening steps and sat beside him.

"You are better, Doctor," he said. "Your face glows. Cool no longer—better, much better. Your blood is quick. It is well. Mine is sluggish. We shall get on splendidly together."

Curiosity burned within me to hear something further of the man who had been found dangling from the tree in Redpost Park, of the man who had hanged him, of the experiments and plots which had occupied the pair before death stepped in, of the dark man in the black room, of the bewitching woman who had died in my surgery, of Viacava himself, who seemed to me the embodiment of all evil. When I reflect now on my condition of mind that morning I can only regard myself as one who had temporarily lost the better half of reason, and had allowed the worser half to reign supreme over his understanding.

"You have told me," I said, "of the manner in which your father came by his death——"

"Ah!" sighed Viacava, before I could proceed further. "My father!" A smile lit up his face. "He was a great man. Had he but lived to proceed with some of the stupendous experiments he was engaged upon, the whole world would have crawled before him in fear and trembling. The secrets which nature so selfishly hides from us would have been dragged into the light. He eventually would have created a new race of men."

"Monsters!" I interrupted with eagerness.

"Monsters, if you like it better; but time was not given him. His first great effort—a comparative failure—the dim precursor of what was to follow—was doomed to be his last. And everything died with him. He was a devil in the flesh," he added, turning his eyes slowly until they had fascinated my gaze. "He is a devil in the spirit, and his spirit lives around and about and within me."

"What a curious combination," I could not help saying.

"You and your wife must have made—devil and angel!"

"Angel!" he cried, with a contemptuous scowl at me.

"She was a fiend, a delightful, ravishing fiend, Doctor. She bewitched you, did she? Do not hide your blushes. She was beautiful. Ah!" with an exhibition of his teeth.

"I shall be even yet with her murderer, believe me!"

"Her murderer! You have already spoken of murder. Why not call things by their right names? There was no murder."

"Was there not? You think so. But why should you not think so. You do not know what I know."

"What is that?"

"It is my secret—a secret I intend to live upon. A secret we may both live upon if you have courage and are wise."

"Tell it to me. I am naturally secretive. You will find I am to be trusted."

"Not now, Doctor; not now. Some day you will be enlightened. It may be that you would have been enlightened without my intervention. But let us to business. You will deliver my letter at the earliest opportunity?"

I nodded.

"You will see that it is into Mr. Brabazon's own hands the letter goes. That his own eyes read it. That no eyes but his own see it."

"There is a difficulty there. In fact, the whole matter is more difficult than at first I imagined. Mr. Ashcroft is ever present. There is the initial difficulty of getting inside the house uninvited."

"You must surmount these obstacles. Stratagem must be brought into play. Let me think. Let me think. So. You are the only one who can pass the threshold. The servant who keeps watch and guard over the house will admit you. I know the man, but he daren't admit me, and, moreover, I do not desire to see my dear friend Brabazon. You know your way up the staircase. You know Mr. Brabazon's room. You are there. An excuse can be offered

for your intrusion—say, the burning anxiety to see your dear friends once more. Mr. Ashcroft is but mortal. He can be taken off his guard, and induced to fetch something from down stairs which you require. It can be done with a little difficulty—a little reflection. You are not suspected of harm. Perhaps,” with a short laugh, “you may learn a secret when Mr. Ashcroft leaves the room.”

I made no comment on Viacava's proposals. Again I nodded. It soothed me to listen to the cold, measured tones of the man.

The fierce fire of curiosity was burning itself out slowly.

“You are dull once more, Doctor,” he said. “I had many things to say to you, but I fear you are losing interest in my utterances.”

“No, I assure you I am not,” I murmured in a voice that was but a feeble echo of my earlier earnestness. “Pray go on; you spoke of a future—I do not mean the immediate future—when we shall be more intimately associated. What do you mean by that?”

“This: one day—it may not be far distant—Ashcroft will die. I shall not be sorry when he does die.”

“Why?”

“Because he thwarts purposes of mine. Is not that sufficient cause?”

“You speak in riddles.”

“You will find the answer soon. *If*—he emphasised the word slightly—“you survive the old man——”

"Why should I not?" I interrupted. "Is there any reason in your mind?"

"None," he answered with a laugh. "But fate plays strange pranks occasionally. If you survive him, Mr. Brazazon will require a new companion. He will select you if you play your cards properly."

"It may not suit me to step into Mr. Ashcroft's shoes," I said angrily. "You dispose of me as if I were your individual property."

"You are angry, Doctor. Well, it will be best you should not thwart me. You know me now. I care not a snap of the finger for your life, nor for any man's. Ashcroft has dared me. He knows me too, but he has the courage of the devil himself. He has lived in danger; it has hardened him to the very verge of recklessness, but he may dare me once too often. You must not—you shall not defy me. All will go well if you assist me; but all will go wrong if you decline. Do you realize the position?"

I was dumbstricken. I felt I was wholly in the power of this man. I was not terrified at the thought, but my senses were numbed. I was a mere automaton. I had no power to move, or I should have fled from the spot, fled from the man whom again I loathed. My former curiosity had disappeared. Before meeting with Viacava that morning I had vaguely determined to unbosom myself to him, to worm from him the secrets he held in his breast concerning all those who were wrapped around with the mystery of Redpost Park;

but now I had no desire either to learn any secrets of the past, or to dip into the secrets of the future.

"Go, Doctor," said Viacava with eagerness, pointing towards the terrace. "Go; you are growing stupid again. Go and prescribe for yourself. You irritate me. You have one week from this to deliver my letter. I shall do myself the honour of calling upon you on the eighth day from this. You will have something to tell me then if——." He checked himself with a chuckle.

His words roused me. I rose and walked away as if the outstretched finger of Viacava was impelling me onward.

## CHAPTER XV.

THE extraordinary variations of my temperament which dated from the period of my visits to Redpost House—but especially the phenomenal rapidity of the mental metamorphoses which had overpowered me from the moment Viacava had first threatened my life on the cliffs, to the time he had commanded me to leave the jetty—are still to me a source of uneasy speculation, a study curious and unsatisfactory.

When I endeavour now, after the lapse of many years, to bring myself back to the examination of my mental condition during that horrible period of my life when Viacava exercised over me an evil mesmeric influence, I seem to be gazing at a whirling kaleidoscope which shows me nothing but instantaneous and bewildering changes. The horror which was yet in store for me would have proved a horror for the stoutest heart, the most securely balanced intellect; but the sensations which the son of Doctor Bletsoe inspired—the primary callousness to deadly peril, the thirst for Viacava's life which succeeded that strange apathy, the intense hatred and loath-

ing of the man which I experienced as we walked side by side over the cliffs, the mad prurient curiosity which devoured me the following morning, and the baneful influence which I allowed Viacava to exercise over me, the eagerness with which I sought him out and abandoned myself to him—all are inscrutable mysteries to myself. No examination, however searching, can discover and analyse the causes of my mental disturbances. Admitting this, it is, I own, useless to hope—as I did once hope—for sympathy : it is impossible even to expect that I shall be credited with truthfulness. Yet, the truth I have told ; neither extenuated my weakness and my folly, nor set down in my favour aught in which the most searching introspection can find a flaw.

I will not again attempt any further analysis of my mental condition ; I will simply give a brief and plain narrative of facts, relate in a straightforward manner the few remaining incidents in my strange and terrible story. I should like to dwell upon my thoughts and my actions during the week which elapsed between my interview on the jetty at Broadstairs with Viacava, and the moment when I found myself once more inside the gates of Redpost Park, charged with a message from the son of Dr. Bletsoe to the son of Archibald Brabazon ; but these thoughts and actions of mine have no proper place in my narrative : they concern only myself, and would, I fancy, prove of little interest to others.

The last night left to me by Viacava for the performance of my promise was a clear cold night. There was a touch

of frost in the air. A young moon floated in a cloudless sky, and the stars were dim and dwarfed.

My professional duties detained me in the surgery until the stroke of ten. Shortly after ten I had passed the gates of Redpost Park, Viacava's letter in the breast pocket of my overcoat. I walked slowly up the carriage way until I reached the spot where I had found the almost lifeless body of Madame Viacava. Here I stood still, a nervous dread thrilling me. I felt inclined to turn, to run back to the gate, to defy Viacava on the morrow; but, with a slight effort, I succeeded in dismissing the impulse to retrace my steps.

The light in Mr. Brabazon's window was visible from the spot where I stood, and though I tried to laugh at my folly, I could not dismiss the absurd idea that the light was an eye blazing from the forehead of a monster—an eye in which malignity and mockery struggled for mastery.

A moment more, and a rustle to the right broke upon my ears; then a crackling sound warned me that some one—some thing—was advancing stealthily upon me, and an icy shiver seized and shook me. Could it be that the hideous serpent was approaching me—the serpent who had left his fang in Madame Viacava's wrist?

Before I could decide in what direction it were best to flee, the tall dark sinuous figure of a man stood out before me on the carriage way,

With a cry of relief I rushed towards the man, and stretching forth my hands I attempted to grasp his hand, for

he seemed inclined to retire again to the shadows from which he had suddenly emerged.

"Mr. Brabazon!" I exclaimed. "Do you forget me?"

He stepped backwards a few paces. A strange, tremulous motion of the head, like the motion of one afflicted with a disease popularly known as St. Vitus's dance, agitated him, communicating itself to his whole body as he stood facing me for a moment.

"Ah! Doctor Emanuel!" he cried, advancing quickly and offering me his left hand, which I grasped warmly, "I did not recognise you at first. Your overcoat alters your appearance very much. Excuse my left hand," he added. "My right wrist has been injured—nothing, a mere scratch. I am so pleased it is you."

His tall figure stood out clearly and sharply in the white moonlight. He seemed to have grown taller and more slender, and there was that curious suppleness of the body, an undulatory movement of the whole frame, which I had not noticed during my visits to Redpost House.

"And I am so pleased to see you once more," I said. "It seems ages since we met last. How is Mr. Ashcroft?"

"He is well," replied Mr. Brabazon, "but somewhat depressed. He has been over-anxious about my unfortunate wrist. Indeed, it has troubled him quite as much as it has troubled me."

He looked about him as he spoke, as if he were listening for some sound.

"Let me examine it," I said, with pardonably professional eagerness.

"No, no," he cried, stepping back. "It is nothing—nothing. I assure you."

I doubted this statement, for there were unmistakable traces of suffering in his pallid face. Whether it was the white light of the moon deceived me or not I was unable to decide, but I thought I had never before looked upon a face so deadly white. The more I gazed at Mr. Brabazon the more horrible did this unnatural pallor seem.

"Will you come with me," he said, after a brief, awkward pause, "and see our old friend Ashcroft?"

Again he started as he spoke, as if his speech presaged danger; and turning his head slightly to one side he seemed to be trying again to catch some sound.

I arrested his wandering thoughts by saying in a somewhat loud tone, "I will accompany you to the house with pleasure. I shall be very glad to see Mr. Ashcroft again."

Then, as Mr. Brabazon turned his steps towards me, I remembered Viacava's letter. What better opportunity than this could I hope for? Mr. Ashcroft's absence relieved me of the unpleasant task of resorting to what Viacava had termed stratagem.

"By the by, Mr. Brabazon," I said, "I have a message for you. I had almost forgotten it. A letter," placing my hand inside my overcoat, and taking out a white envelope.

"A letter!" he cried, darting swiftly from my side until he

stood a few paces off. "Do not give it to me: Give it to Mr. Ashcroft. I cannot answer for myself."

There was a wild unearthly wail in his voice. What could it mean? Had Viacava planned some plot, the meaning of which I could not even guess? What was the danger hinted at by the writer of the note I now held between my trembling fingers? Had I not better face the known danger which Viacava had threatened than the unknown danger which might follow the delivery of my message? Yes, I would defy the cowardly ruffian. I was about to replace the letter in my pocket when with a swift and almost imperceptible motion Mr. Brabazon reached my side, and snatched the letter from my fingers. He tore open the envelope, and gazing at the sky he placed himself in a position where the light of the moon would fall across the letter. I stood, silently, in agonised suspense as I watched him—the tremulous motion of the head now agitating him violently—scanning the letter. His vision must, I reflected, be wonderfully acute: How quickly and easily he reads! When he had mastered the contents of Viacava's note he stood for a brief, awful moment perfectly still and erect. Then with uplifted left hand he crushed the paper, and in the act of dashing it to the ground he struck his injured wrist a swift and violent blow. A yell of agony bursting from him, he threw his head back, and, his eyes ablaze, he rushed upon me, lolling out a long, black, forked tongue.

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER XVI.

IT was many weeks before the precious light of reason dawned on me again. I came out of the land of shadows wearily, drearily. Several days went by before I would acknowledge, even to myself, that I lived again. I could see my kind old housekeeper, who had nursed me through my fever, sitting by my side, tenderly smoothing my pillows, or cooling my burning brow, but I could not find words to thank her.

Doctor Hallworthy too was most attentive and kind. He knew the great danger had passed, and yet he left me—how I thank him now for it—to come back into the world in my own leisurely way.

"You have had a bad time of it, old fellow," he said one day, "but you are all right now, and we must have no nonsense you know. Next week you will go down stairs, and I'll take care you are not allowed to mope in your old way. You must knock about—rouse yourself."

I opened my eyes and smiled. It was pleasant to think

that I had made some friends, that my worthless life had some value in the eyes of others. From that time forth I determined to recover, and my progress was wonderfully rapid.

Once more I was down stairs, and seated in a cosy chair at a comfortable fire in my drawing-room. My mirror showed me an old man, gray-haired and wrinkled, but—I hope I need scarcely make the declaration—the change did not trouble me. I was calmer, and more at ease with myself and with the world than I had ever been during my former life. More horrors had been crowded into one short week than have been spread over the lifetime of most men, and I felt that Providence would mercifully spare me and pity me for evermore.

Though I was curious to know how my life had been saved, how it was that I too had not died as Madame Viacava died, I did not dare to question any one yet a while. In the first place, I knew my questions would be fenced, for Doctor Hallworthy's strict injunctions were that I should not be allowed to talk over much—I knew what that meant—and in the second place I was not eager to have the recollections of that night in Redpost Park forced upon me with added strength.

I did not inquire if Signor Viacava had called; but I concluded he had failed to keep his appointment for some good reason of his own.

The tenth day after my first visit to my drawing-room I asked Doctor Hallworthy if I might read my letters—I guessed that a budget of correspondence would have accumulated. "Yes," he said, "I have no objection now; you are going on famously. Read them by all means—it will be a relaxation for you—but mind that you toss all the unpleasant ones—threats of distraint for taxes, *et hoc genus irritabile omne*," he added, with a loud hearty laugh, "into the fire." With a feeble smile I promised to take his advice, and when the kind-hearted medico had left the house a plethoric letter bag was placed by Mrs. Chilcomb on a table at my elbow.

The correspondence was of a very varied and comprehensive nature, but there is no occasion for me to go into details about it. I left one letter for the last. It was a very bulky envelope, and I prejudged it to contain a circular from the latest gold mining swindle, or from a monster drapery house which had recently reared its head in my suburb.

I was rather surprised to find that the envelope contained a letter of many pages, written in close crabbed handwriting. It began "My dear Doctor Emanuel."

I turned over to the last page and read: "Henry Ashcroft."

The letter was dated at the foot of the last page. The date was the previous day.

Eagerly I commenced to read the old man's letter, and after some cogitation I have decided to give its contents in full.

## MR. ASHCROFT'S LETTER.

I learn, my dear Doctor, that you are convalescent ; and I hope you will pardon me for attempting to disturb you at a time when no doubt unreflecting quiet is the most potent medicine. The knowledge that you have recovered, that you are once more sound in mind and body has given me unutterable relief, as well as heartfelt pleasure. If these phrases seem hackneyed, pray lay the blame to a hand which is growing old and feeble, and has lost the art of manipulating phrases.

I have experienced great difficulty in commencing my letter to you ; the dozen lines above have been written two days, and as I read them now they seem to wear a cold and mechanical aspect. But I have decided to let them pass.

My reason for addressing this lengthy epistle to you will appear as I proceed with my narrative. I call it a narrative, as if it were the recital of some fictitious story : at one time I thought no earthly power could induce me to put what I know upon paper in such a shape. Necessity now compels me.

Let me begin at the beginning, and be patient with me if I enter into details which may not seem to concern you, and which may not interest you.

Forty-five years ago I first entered into the service of the late Mr. Ralph Brabazon as a kind of secretary and steward. I was then in my twentieth year. Two years afterwards

Ralph Brabazon mysteriously disappeared. His brother Archibald succeeded to the property and to the money—there were no other relatives living. In less than another twelve months, Mr. Archibald—who kept me on in the position I had occupied under his brother—brought home to Redpost House a young and beautiful woman—his wife, God help her!

I will not detain you with a long-winded exposition of my new master's character. It will be sufficient to say that he was a morose, tyrannical creature. I am not particularly uncharitable, but I have no hesitation in declaring there was nothing good in Mr. Archibald's composition.

He had originally selected medicine as a profession, but he had never made any attempt to take a medical degree. He was simply a devil-may-care young man in the beginning; his vices did not come prominently to the surface in his early youth; but he descended in the moral scale rapidly. Evil companions, perhaps, helped to degrade a nature which at no period had been an admirable one.

His closest friend—if the word can be applied to such as he—was a certain Philip Bletsoe, the son of a German father and an English mother. This man was clever, after a fashion. As a student he was always full of strange, wild theories which never seemed to result in any practical good or evil. He was a confirmed drunkard; and by degrees his theories developed into absurd and monstrous views of the problems of life and death.

Whether Bletsoe poisoned the mind of Archibald Brabazon, or whether Archibald poisoned the mind of the young doctor—I am speaking now of the time when Bletsoe, a fully-qualified physician, had taken up his quarters at Redpost House—is immaterial; but both men fell from bad to worse and gloried in the fall. The important difference between them was, that as the years went by the master of Redpost House rescued himself from the thralldom of drink, while the doctor allowed its grasp to grow closer and closer.

A room in the house was set apart for Doctor Bletsoe. He made of it a laboratory, a museum of living and dead curiosities, an eating room, a drinking room, a sleeping room; and my master and he spent most of the day, and often the greater part of the night in this room. Its door was closed against all the household except themselves; but sometimes the agonising shrieks of living creatures—animals, we supposed, who were being vivisected or otherwise operated on—used to reach our ears, and fill us with terror.

I scarcely know how I managed to remain in that ghastly house, but remain I did. I felt a sincere pity for the young wife, a tender, delicate, gentle lady, yet one who, with all her gentleness, could exhibit traces of a strong will when circumstances demanded a strong will. Her lot was a most unhappy one. Her parents had forced her into the marriage; they were poor and sadly in need of money, Mr. Brabazon was rich and wanted her for his wife. He knew she had left her heart outside the gates of Redpost Park, but the

slumbering devil of jealousy did not fully awake in Archibald Brabazon's breast until nearly two years after the marriage.

He had occasion to make a journey to a distant part of the country, where some property of his lay, and he was not expected to return to Redpost House for a month. The news of his departure caused a feeling of intense relief to most of the members of his household, and I could see that his wife made no secret of her delight at the prospect of being freed, even for so short a period, from his hateful companionship.

Prior to his departure he had been more than ordinarily cruel to Mrs. Brabazon, and he had outraged her feelings beyond measure by compelling her to listen to stories of the strange experiments and discoveries Doctor Bletsoe and himself had recently made.

Amongst other things, Mr. Archibald possessed an inordinate love for the reptile tribe, and he could not or would not understand why other people should not share in his love for reptiles. His wife hated, and he knew it well, the mere mention of his pets, and it angered him that nothing short of physical force could compel her to enter the room where his ophidiary was.

He did employ sheer force on the day of his departure ; and when I saw the white, passion-constrained face of Mrs. Brabazon, when she came from the horrid chamber, I felt she had at last resolved upon some desperate course of action.

During the second week of Archibald Brabazon's absence I was roaming through the park, a book under my arm, when suddenly my eyes lighted on two people standing close together in a sort of arbour, formed by tall, spreading azalea trees.

I would have shut my eyes against the fact that one of the figures was that of Mrs. Brabazon, and the other that of a young man—a stranger to me ; but, as I was about to move stealthily away I caught sight of another figure standing behind one of the azaleas.

His back was turned towards me, but I knew at a glance who the man was. Archibald Brabazon ! His neck was craned in the effort, no doubt, to overhear what was passing between his wife and the stranger.

I knew the passionate reckless nature of the man, and I feared a tragedy ; so I decided to remain close at hand, in the hope I should be enabled by my presence to prevent the consummation of that tragedy.

As I noiselessly approached the group I could not help overhearing some of the conversation which was going on between Mrs. Brabazon and her companion, and I felt that the words were biting deep into the heart of the husband.

She was confessing her intense loathing of the man she had married, a loathing which, she declared, was greater than the loathing she felt for his serpents. The grossness of the serpents' nature must have been, she said, infused into the spirit of him she had falsely vowed to love and honour.

This was evidently too much for Mr. Brabazon. He could no longer restrain himself. He parted the foliage which hid him from his wife, the cry of a wild, infuriated beast bursting from him.

I rushed forward, calling loudly upon my master to be merciful. My cries prevented murder. He turned round, and facing me, a scowl of baffled rage distorting his features, he said hoarsely :

"You have saved his life—and hers. I value my own neck. Damnation seize you!—Go!" he cried, turning to the stranger, who with blanched, alarmed face, stood near him. "Go; and thank this man," pointing to me, "for your life."

The stranger, with a piteous glance at the trembling wife, moved backwards a few steps.

"Or, if it please you better, good sir," continued my master with a mocking laugh, "make free of my park at all times of day and night. You are welcome. Do not stare. I mean it. Perhaps madam may be gracious again. She will have her liberty, be assured. And for the present good day, sir," bowing twice with mock solemnity.

The stranger walked slowly away. Mr. Brabazon, his arms folded across his chest, gazed at the retreating figure for some minutes; then turning to his wife he slowly hissed out, "So, madam, I am more loathsome than a serpent. May the devil send you a serpent for a son, madam. Get you indoors!"

My mistress, who was in a delicate state of health, remained in her room for many days. When she appeared amongst us again her face was paler than ever, but there was a strong light in her eyes which, I feared me, betokened danger. Her husband was ostentatiously polite to her, and never, so far as I could learn, made any allusion to the scene in the park. He would express his anxiety that she should enjoy the fresh air oftener than was her wont, and that she should try and dismiss her moping mood. I could not understand Mr. Brabazon, but I feared it was only the calm which precedes the storm.

One evening I observed my mistress going out of doors as dusk was approaching. Mr. Brabazon was in the laboratory at the time, but at breakfast that morning she had declared her intention of walking in the park; he had seemed pleased—so pleased that I dreaded some fresh evil. Therefore I determined to follow my mistress at a respectful distance. I saw that she had wandered to the right, behind the house, and was probably intending to visit a knoll from which a fine view of the setting sun was visible at that time of year.

I allowed her to take about a quarter of an hour's start of me, and then, arming myself with a stout stick and a loaded pistol, I followed in her footsteps. I had no conception of the nature of the danger which would attend her walk, but that there was danger I felt assured.

In about ten minutes after I had left the house I heard a scream. With fast-beating heart I ran quickly forward. At

the foot of the hillock my mistress stood, evidently paralysed with terror at the sight which met her gaze. The ground swarmed with hideous reptiles. I shouted at the top of my voice not to be alarmed. My cry reached her ears and recalled her senses. She turned quickly round, stared at me for a moment, a wild terror in her eyes, and fell to the ground. I rushed to her side, lifted her into my arms ; and then I retraced my steps to the house, carrying with me what I believed to be her dead body.

However, I was unfortunately—dear Doctor, I say unfortunately, and mean it—mistaken. My mistress lived for some months ; died, giving birth to a monster—the monster whom I have loved and lived with from the hour of his birth ; the man whom all others but myself would rush from, as from a foul and deadly plague, did they but know the secret of his terrible birthright.

I will not dwell, dear Doctor, on the incidents which immediately followed. The sole charge of the child devolved upon me and upon Dr. Bletsoe.

The whole nature of the Doctor seemed to change from the time he heard of the unnatural creature, who was now heir to Redpost Park.

He abandoned drink completely, and appeared to live for nothing but the expiation of his former wickedness. He nursed the child with the tenderness of a mother, and seemed never at ease unless in its presence. He held some absurd

theory—the product of a drink-demented brain—that he was accountable for the inhuman creature that had been sent to Archibald Brabazon as an earthly punishment for his sins.

The father would never look at his child, but shut himself up in a room at the top of the house. His footsteps could be heard all day, pacing to and fro in the prison he had allotted to himself. He would admit no one but Dr. Bletsoe to his presence, and one by one the servants left the house, none being the wiser of the mystery which hung around it, but all fearful of some unknown peril. The authorities had been informed of the existence of reptiles in the park, and had scoured it of the pestilence. But no charge could be made against the owner of the park, for it was found the serpents were half-dead creatures; some had been maimed, and from some the fangs and venom glands had been cruelly extracted.

When young Ralph Brabazon was eight years of age Dr. Bletsoe with my consent extracted the fangs, which occupied the place of the eye teeth; but in a few months nature replaced the fangs, and in despair the doctor went out one morning and hanged himself.

Some suspicion attached itself at the time to Archibald Brabazon, but it was proved beyond doubt that he was pacing to and fro in his own room at the time the doctor must have taken his last fatal step.

I had almost forgotten to mention that Bletsoe was a married man. He had married in his student days, but his wife

he was sent to his sins. himself could be allotted to his se, none d it, but ies had ark, and ould be und the named, a cruelly age Dr. ccupied nature out one chibald, s pacing st have a mar- his wife

had fled from him in disgust before he had taken up his abode in Redpost House. He never mentioned to me the existence of a wife until the morning of his suicide. He put a letter into my hand addressed to Mrs. Bletsoe, and asked me to post it later on.

After the doctor's suicide Archibald Brabazon suddenly determined to quit England. He came down stairs one day and desired me to be in readiness to start immediately for Paris. He would follow me, he said.

I went to Paris, taking young Ralph with me, a dreamy, intelligent boy, with no knowledge of his horrible heritage. The day after we arrived in the French capital Archibald Brabazon came into the room where his son and I were sitting. He approached the boy—it was the second time he had laid eyes on him—and placed his hand on his mouth before I had time to arrest the action. The child, ignorant of the identity of the strange man, cried and rushed into my arms. The father left the room in silence. A few minutes afterwards I heard the crack of a pistol. My master had failed to make his son the instrument of his death and had shot himself.

After the first shock of the tragedy had worn itself away, and when it was arranged, in accordance with the instructions which Mr. Brabazon had left behind him, that the whole charge of young Ralph should devolve upon me, I determined to roam about the Continent.

My desire was to lose all connection and communication with a world which knew, or suspected, anything concerning the Brabazons. Of course I kept up communication with the solicitors who had charge of the Brabazon estate, but no one else was aware of my movements or intentions.

I knew the secret was safe in my hands, and so far as I was aware, no other being in the world had a suspicion of the dreadful truth.

Young Ralph was, as I have already told you, an intelligent, retiring boy. Moreover, he was docile and affectionate. He developed a turn for study early. He seemed to desire no other companions but his books and myself, so that my burden was a comparatively light one. My only dread was that he should discover the dreadful truth that he was different from other human beings, that there was no place for him in the world of men. With this fear ever haunting me I took care that he should see no books which could give him any information leading up to a knowledge of his horrible heritage, of the monstrous, the deadly power he possessed. Companions, as I have told you, he had none, nor did he ever grumble at the isolation which I enforced upon him. His mind was, I need scarcely tell you, of a different mould from that of the ordinary run of mortals, but there was no marked eccentricity in his behaviour.

For twelve years we travelled about the Continent, selecting the smaller towns and the places least frequented by strangers; and it seemed to me that no suspicion had ever crossed

Ralph Brabazon's mind that I was withholding any important knowledge from him. As his twenty-first birthday approached we found ourselves in a small town in Southern Italy. To my surprise, and with some anxiety, some foreboding of danger on my mind, I discovered that a German physician who had spent the greater portion of his life in England was stopping at the little hotel where we had put up. As we were the only people in the place who spoke English, I could not, without attracting attention, refuse to enter into conversation with him. He was a delicate man of about thirty years of age, and evidently in the last stages of consumption. I found him to be a young man with an intellect as powerful as his body was weak. He seemed to be much attracted by Ralph Brabazon, and with pain I could see that he guessed there was something strange about my charge. For the first time it struck me forcibly how peculiar was the speech of Ralph Brabazon.

Having been closely associated with him for so many years, so accustomed to the inflections of his voice, and so little accustomed to conversing with others, it did not strike me as being a peculiarly odd or unnatural voice, but evidently it was otherwise with the young doctor. By some merciful dispensation Ralph Brabazon never obtruded his tongue at any time. Whether it was that he had learned it was unlike the tongues of other men, or whether it was owing to causes over which he had no control, his tongue was ever confined within his mouth.

You will probably guess what resulted. Ralph Brabazon picked up one day a work on anatomy belonging to the doctor. I had no suspicion at the time what the nature of his studies were until one morning—we always occupied the same bedroom—I arose to find the body of my young master on the floor in a pool of blood. Instantly I summoned the assistance of the German doctor, and he discovered that Ralph had forcibly extracted the hideous fangs, ignorant of the awful fact that nature would replace them again. I laid the whole story before the doctor, whose name was Ludwig Englehorn.

He was at first inclined to treat my tale with supercilious incredulity, but in the end he had to confess that facts were too much for him. He pulled Ralph Brabazon through a long illness, which followed his first attempt to rid himself of his monstrous deformity, and when young Ralph was able to be up and about once more, the doctor called me into his room one evening and said, "I would not stand in your shoes, much less in the shoes of the poor fellow you are shielding, for a new lease of life."

He saw I treated his words rather with surprise than with alarm. "I am perfectly serious," he went on; "your life will for evermore be in imminent peril." I was about to speak; to tell him that he was taking an exaggerated view of the danger which I should incur in the future—for I knew how dearly my young master loved me—when he stopped me with a motion of his hand, "Let me go on," he said. "He

has now the knowledge of his hideous power. Thanks to your care and treatment of him he will for ever be held in check while you are with him ; but some day, when some intense physical pain attacks him, he will lose control over himself, and you will in all probability fall a victim to his uncontrollable rage. Perhaps you do not know what a horrible death the death from snake bite is?" I assured him I did, but that I had still no fear of my young master ; that no words of his could alter my opinion of him. "Very well," he said, "you will have only yourself to blame. It is fortunate for you that I have made snake venom a study. I have not, it is true, discovered much that is of importance, but I am confident I can protect you. I do not say I can guarantee you absolute immunity from danger, but I can certainly protect you. I will—do not gainsay me—inoculate you for snake poison."

I was horror-stricken at the notion that Doctor Englehorn, who was evidently wholly in earnest, and to whose intelligence I was, even then, ready to pay hearty tribute, should contemplate the possibility of my dear young master inflicting an injury—and such an injury—upon me. Doctor Englehorn saw he had alarmed me, and he renewed his attack with increased vigour. In the end I consented to be operated upon. I felt I could place implicit confidence in Doctor Englehorn, comparative stranger though he was. He would give me no information—indeed I did not press him very hard to do so, for the information could be of little value to me

—regarding the nature of the inoculation. He frankly acknowledged that his experiment would be a dangerous one, but he assured me he was confident of success, and I trusted him.

It was touch and go with me, a struggle between death and life, for twenty-four hours; and the agony I experienced taught me to recognise the tremendous nature of the danger which lay before me in the future. Still, I allowed no dread of Mr. Brabazon to cow me or make me shirk the responsibility I had undertaken.

After I had come safely through the struggle which resulted from Doctor Englehorn's experiment, the young physician gave me some instructions about my future treatment of my young master. The instructions were mainly to this effect: "Do not check him or thwart him in any ordinary or fairly reasonable desires of his. The effects of his early training will be likely to prevent him from asking or seeking for much that is dangerous. Isolate him as much as you possibly can; keep moving from place to place with him—as you have already done. Be always at his side. If he should ever, when in the country, seek to roam about at night, allow him to do so, but keep watch upon him yourself, without allowing him to suppose he is being watched. That will not always be possible, but you can only do your best. Great mental agony he is not likely to endure; the greatest mental trouble that could visit him would probably be the knowledge that other men guessed his secret. You can prevent that; *my* mouth, be assured, is sealed. Great physical pain it is quite possible

may visit him—an accident may happen to him. In such a case do not hesitate ; let no foolish sentimentality cause you to pause. Lock him into a room until the first paroxysms have passed away and prostrated him. Go not near him there yourself, nor do not allow any one to go near him. His nature will allow him to live easily without food or drink for many days, should occasion arise to place lock and key upon him. Keep tobacco, spirits, or opiates always out of his reach, and do not allow them to be used in his presence. If he should fall ill you must attend to him yourself. For this purpose it will be necessary for you to make yourself acquainted with some simple forms of treatment. He is not likely to sicken easily. Ordinary diseases will not, in my opinion, be likely to visit him. In fact," he said, "there is but one great danger that can happen—so far as Mr. Brabazon is personally concerned—and as I cannot offer you any advice or suggest any remedy in such a contingency, I will be silent as to the nature of that danger, and can only say to you : Do what you think best and wisest, outside the plans I have sketched for you. If it were not that I know you are clear-headed and sensible I would at once insist upon having Mr. Brabazon confined in some asylum ; but such a course would probably result in the deaths of a succession of keepers, and I feel he is comparatively safe in your hands. At all events he will be much safer in your hands than in any asylum. You have a terrible duty to perform, but I know you will perform it to the best of your ability—you can do no more."

I pressed him to tell me what the contingency was, of the nature of which he had not enlightened me, but he shook his head and was silent.

Twelve months afterwards I learned with deep regret that the brilliant young doctor had passed away.

You will now see, dear Doctor Emanuel, why it was that your proposal to administer an opiate to Mr. Brabazon when first you visited him caused me so much uneasiness. I would not on that occasion have summoned your aid, but Mr. Brabazon expressed a strong desire to have you called in.

He had heard something of you through me. I had but related to him the gossip, which our servant from time to time had retailed to me—and sometimes in his nightly rambles through the park he has stood for hours behind the fence bordering your garden, staring at you as you sat in your study window.

He was anxious to see you, and I could not refuse his request, that you should be summoned, though I doubted the wisdom of submitting to my master's will!

But I am running in advance of my story.

For many years we continued our roving life. My young master had changed considerably since his discovery of his unnatural possession. He grew more retiring than ever, buried himself in his books, and seemed at times to hate the sight of his fellow man.

Fortunately we both were blessed with excellent health.

Whenever our wanderings brought us to a wooded country a strange anxiety would seize hold of my young master, to wander all night long through the forest. Beyond this fulfilment of Doctor Englehorn's prophecy, nothing came to pass for many years that caused me any unusual uneasiness ; but one night in his wanderings through a lonely wood his foot caught in a hole in the ground, and he stumbled, spraining his ankle, as I afterwards discovered. His cry of pain reached my ears, for I was following his footsteps as I had those of his mother on the fatal day when the reptiles had been let loose in Redpost Park. I was soon at his side. It must have been that he did not recognise me in the darkness, for instantly I felt his fangs imbedded in my cheek. I bear the marks still, as you may possibly have observed. Then, with a cry of anguish, he seized me and frantically sucked the venom from the wounds, and sobbed and wept in my arms, as I tried to assure him that I was in no danger.

There is little to relate—nothing, in fact, that is necessary for you to know—about the years which passed from that time until the year we returned to England. His charity was unbounded. He could never read or hear of a case of distress without experiencing a desire to relieve it. Roughly speaking, I should think three-fourths of his income was devoted to charitable purposes.

About a month before we came to Redpost Park we were at Monaco. Here a desire to gamble seized upon Mr.

Brabazon. I had no objection to urge. He was enormously rich, and it could not matter, so far as he was personally concerned, if he lost ten, nay, a hundred thousand pounds. For several nights he stood at the tables and was always disgusted with the results. His losses one day would be counterbalanced by gain the next. He played on, and one evening he broke the bank. Some curiosity to know the mysterious stranger, who was reported to be a modern Cræsus, arose after this, and I tried to hurry him from the town, but I was too late. A professional gambler, and blackleg, to boot, discovered his name at the hotel where we stopped—I had often tried to make him alter his name, but without effect, and sometimes, without his knowledge, I had given him a false name. At Monaco I had entered him as Mr. Ashcroft, junior, my son.

The gambler I have referred to stopped Mr. Brabazon in the hall of the hotel one night and said, "I am addressing Mr. ——" my master filled in the blank, "Brabazon," he said. "Ah! Brabazon! I thought so," the stranger said. "Mr. Ralph Brabazon of Redpost Park." Mr. Brabazon was a little astonished, but his interrogator smiled away whatever fears or doubts were arising in his mind and continued, "I was very anxious to know who the lucky man really was. I am myself an unlucky player, and it interested me to know. Many thanks." And he went away bowing and smiling. Mr. Brabazon told me of the incident. I was alarmed, but soon forgot my fears.

Next day a letter was handed to Mr. Brabazon as we sat at dinner in our private room. As soon as he had read the letter he threw up his hands, and then flung them down on the table. A knife, by some untoward accident, had been placed against the dish in front of Mr. Brabazon. His right hand struck the blade, which buried itself in his open palm. With a howl of pain he jumped from his chair and rushing upon me fastened his fangs in my cheek. As on the former occasion his paroxysm passed quickly away and he frantically sucked the venom from the wound, sobs of wild despair convulsing him.

I read the fatal letter the same evening. It ran thus :

*To RALPH BRABAZON of Redpost Park, in the County of Surrey, England.*

SIR,—Your secret is known to me. An annuity of five thousand pounds per annum will seal my lips, not one penny less. I have for a long time been seeking you out. Naturally I am not anxious to find myself often in your presence, but do not flatter yourself that the power you possess has terror for me. If your payments are regular you are safe. If you decline my very reasonable terms I will do myself the honour of exposing you through the length and breadth of the land. Not alone will your diabolical secret be known to all men, but the secret unknown perhaps even to you—that *your father*—if one may be pardoned for calling him your *father*—murdered *my* father in cold blood.

Till death, yours,

ANTHONY BLIETSOE.

To my master the name of Bletsoe was a hieroglyphic—the Rosetta stone was locked in my breast. I tried to persuade Mr. Brabazon that the writer of the letter was a lunatic—I still believe him to be a lunatic—but I did not, of course, attempt to hide my anxiety to fly from the man who knew our secret. For my own part I believed he did know the secret—that he had learned it through some papers of his father was quite probable—but I endeavoured to convince Mr. Brabazon that the man was only a scoundrel who had guessed something and could prove nothing. “His statement about your father and his,” I said, “proves him to be demented; but at all events he is a scoundrel who would hold a double-edged sword above our heads. One edge of that sword is sharp and deadly—we must avoid it; the other edge is a bogus edge—it cannot wound, but we are weak and it may hurt us.”

We decided to return instantly, and with as much secrecy as possible, to England. In Redpost House Mr. Brabazon thought he would find security. In the breast of the Englishman there is always the feeling that his house *is* his castle, his home, a haven of refuge.

You know when we came here. You will remember, doubtless, your first visit to us. The dread that Mr. Brabazon, in his desire to make a friend of you, should let his secret slip always haunted me. The night I hurried you away, I am certain he was on the eve of making a confession. He feels—and can I blame him?—that I am growing old;

and a faithful companion he must have when I am gone.

Mr. Brabazon's taste for nightly wanderings developed itself quickly with the influence of this awful park around him. It pained me too, to see that, instead of finding a home in Redpost House, he had found a living grave. Funeral imaginings were, and are, ever present with him. His rooms, his body, his spirit, have been draped in black, since the baleful influence of this house established its sway over him. He has brightened sometimes in your presence, but the brightness is tarnished quickly.

He lives in constant dread of Anthony Bletsoe. You may remember how excited he became when the sound of carriage wheels reached his sensitive ears the first night of your visit.

At this point I think it will not be unwise to break off from the principal theme of this lengthy communication, and direct your attention specially to Bletsoe. A few days subsequent to your terrible adventure in the park I received a letter from him threatening Mr. Brabazon with immediate exposure. He stated he had visited you at Broadstairs, and you had consented to aid him in his plans. No suspicion, believe me, crossed my mind that there was one word of truth in this ; but a conviction seized me that the man was, for some weighty reason, afraid to make himself known to the authorities. Therefore I determined to institute privately inquiries about Anthony Bletsoe. The result of the investi-

gations—it seems there was great difficulty in discovering and piecing together any trustworthy facts concerning the man—I will now summarize for you. It may be that once more Bletsoe will darken your path, and I think it is only right you should learn what a dangerous character he is. I must add that I do not intend to make any use of the information I have obtained. I hope the scoundrel has again quitted the country, and I pray—though I fear such prayers are not of much avail—that the world and I have heard the last of his wickedness, that he will battle with the evil promptings of his evil mind and repent him of what is past.

Previous to his marriage he had temporarily abandoned his father's name, and adopted that of Viacava. This name belonged to a distant relative of his mother. In one of his first fits of homicidal mania—a disease which it seems he had succeeded in hiding from all who had the misfortune to know him—he had committed a brutal murder. The victim was an unfortunate woman who lived in a lodging-house in one of the northern districts of London. The details of this murder are of so extraordinary a nature that I am almost tempted to give them a place in these pages. But as the crime has no direct connection with Mr. Brabazon I have wisely, I hope, decided to make merely this passing mention of it. It will be sufficient to say that the police were completely baffled, and that Bletsoe succeeded in escaping from England before any suspicion attracted itself towards him. After some years a clue to the murder was found, and a certain Antonio Viacava, who had left no traces behind him,

was wanted. Bletsoe had married abroad, and he and his wife had established a gambling hell in Paris, where fortune waited upon them for many years. On the death of his mother, who had returned to her friends in Italy, and who had held little or no communication with her son, certain papers belonging to Dr. Bletsoe came into Anthony Bletsoe's hands. These papers gave him some highly-coloured information about the mysterious owner of Redpost Park, and Bletsoe determined he would lose no opportunity of making capital out of his information. Having made a good deal of money in Paris he was enabled to travel wherever his inclination beckoned, and by one of those unlucky accidents which occur every day he had come across Mr. Brabazon, for whom he was ever on the watch. Baffled at finding his first threat had produced no effect, except the flight of Mr. Brabazon from Monaco, his slumbering madness began to assert itself. He set inquiries on foot, and soon learned that Mr. Brabazon had returned to Redpost Park. Bletsoe feared to follow him to England. He was not aware that under his pseudonym the police were endeavouring to trace him, but he thought it would be unwise to tempt the fates by returning to the scene of his greatest crime. Therefore he despatched his wife to England, telling her what he knew of the secret, and instructing her to get to my ear, and impress me with his (Bletsoe's) determination to disclose the secret if the demand made at Monaco was disregarded. He further desired his wife to adopt the name of Viacava, in order that I might be taken completely off my guard. Bletsoe possessed

the cunning which is often observed in the insane, but his blatant arrogance dominated his cunning. Viacava to him, and to him only, he thought was a name of might, of secret deadly devilry. Under that name he had committed a crime which had horrified all England. The assumption of it by his wife augured success for his attempt to coerce Ralph Brabazon.

The news of his wife's death was a staggering blow, but he quickly recovered from it, and determined to take the matter into his own hands. He would once more assume the name of Viacava. Himself and his crime had been forgotten in England. He was safe, but he would be cautious. When he followed you to Broadstairs no doubt he, in his distorted mental condition, believed the name of Viacava would by some mental process known only to himself strike terror in your ears, and cause you to bend to his potent will without a struggle.

And now, if I have not exhausted your patience, dear Doctor Emanuel, you will hear what occurred in the park the night you found Bletsoe's wife dying on the carriage way. There is no need to dwell on details. Almost in the same manner that you came across the dark figure of my master she came across him.

He would have flown instantly from her—he had no notion what or who she might be ; but she was a stranger, and that was enough. She gave him no time. With the knowledge in her heart of the deadly power Mr. Brabazon possessed,

, fearing mortal danger, no doubt, fired at him, and the bullet struck his right wrist. The shock roused the devil that is in him, and he rushed upon her, burying a fang in her flesh. So great was his rage, so fiercely did he seize upon her, that, as you know, he left a fang in the wound.

The double shock was too much for him. He fell lifelessly to the ground.

I had heard the pistol shot and the shriek that succeeded it, and I ran to the spot. I saw at a glance what had happened, and I dragged him home ; it must have been but a few minutes later when you appeared on the scene. I knew the woman's life was sacrificed, that no human aid could save her or relieve her sufferings. Doctor Englehorn had assured me that Mr. Brabazon's bite would prove more deadly than the bite of a dozen cobras. Knowing this, what could I do? Blame me if you will, blame me for screening the man who had taken her life—but remember my whole being was wrapt up in the man, that the guarding of his secret from the eyes of a prying world had grown to be the paramount object of my life.

At last, dear Doctor, I have nearly done. *You* know what I know about Ralph Brabazon. I do not expect you can sympathise with him, or that you can trample your feelings under foot, and forgive the almost mortal injury he caused you. I have been candid with you. I have told you the whole truth. I will be candid with you to the end. Your life was saved by an accident over which neither you nor

Mr. Brabazon had control. You fell at his feet in a deadly faint; to his unnatural bodily senses you were as one dead. He *could* not strike at you. I found him bending over you, dazed, but with murderous intent in his very gestures. I was fortunate in being able to pinion him before he was aware of my presence.

Can you—is it too much to hope even faintly?—can you find any pity in your heart for the poor, wretched being who, through no fault of his own, is a murderer and a monster? Nature endowed him with noble aspirations, a gentle, generous spirit—with a body, horrible, malignant, unnatural, incredible.

I do not know if you have already made known to the world Mr. Brabazon's secret. I have no reason to hope you have been silent. But there is a possibility you have not spoken. Like a drowning man I cling to that straw. If you have not yet spoken I implore you to be silent for a little longer. Give him, give me a little time. He is very ill; the wound in his wrist seems to have developed very dangerous symptoms. It is beyond my poor skill. He is in great pain, but he bears it like a stoic. Though I know the risk I run I dare not take any precaution to protect myself, lest I should wound his sensitive heart. I feel that the effects of the inoculation have lost their potency. Send me a line, if I may dare to ask so great a favour, telling me the worst. Every minute I think I hear them coming—coming to seize my dear master. Have mercy on us, if you have not yet spoken. Have mercy on us both!

\* \* \* \* \*

## CHAPTER XVII.

THE tears were coursing down my cheeks as I laid down Mr. Ashcroft's letter. I could think only of the noble old man living in that awful house, every moment in deadly peril, no thought disturbing him but the thought that danger was hovering around the monster to whom he had sacrificed his life.

What a miserable puny being I felt I was as I thought of the brave old man who had blotted out his own existence in order to protect the life of a fellow creature, and what a creature!

Mr. Ashcroft, with his white hair and the livid cicatrices on his shaven cheeks, faded from my vision, and in his place stood the tall black figure, with the long, flat head, with the eyes now of a patient, gentle, kindly man, now of an infuriated demon, and below them hidden, but revealed to me, the deadly fangs and the long lissom black tongue. For a while I scarcely knew how I regarded this man, as my mental vision gazed at the shadowy outlines of his body. He had

been to me the cause, directly and indirectly, of so much physical and mental trouble that it was hardly in human nature to sympathise with him in his strange and awful misery.

But I soon succeeded in dismissing the base and selfish considerations which had rendered him so odious to me. Who could be a better judge of him than the man who had lived with him all his life, and had not that man dwelt lovingly upon his kindly nature?

Here was a being, I mused, whom nature has, in some devilish mood, marked with a brand worse than the brand of Cain—immeasurably more awful than the brand of Cain—for the murderer degrades and stains himself by an act of will over which he has been endowed with controlling powers, distorts and misuses his mental functions, shuts himself out from all human sympathy, drags himself down to a level lower than that of the beasts; but this poor wretch has been endowed with a physical formation, partly animal, partly human, and he has almost raised himself clear of the animal passions with which nature has cursed him: it is only when physical pain, an inheritance all of us share with the brute creation, seizes him that he loses control over his higher nature. What can be more pitiable, more horrible!

A strong revulsion of feeling in favour of the man who had but a short time ago sought to take my life seized me. No longer did I find him odious; I thought of him, as Mr. Ash-

croft did, as one to be pitied and protected. The notion of exposing his secret to the gaze of a cruel world vanished from me.

Was I not to be contemned, I reflected, as he was to be pitied? Nature had endowed me with a bodily form as perfect as most ordinary men are blessed with; he was born a monster. Through my own fault; because I had not stamped out my baser passions; because I had allowed myself to float down the tide into the boundless waters of despair, instead of struggling to reach the firm shore, I had been well nigh lost. I had been tossed about, a useless member of society, doing little harm, perhaps, but certainly performing no worthy deeds. Ralph Brabazon, on the other hand, had struggled with his brute nature, and had well nigh succeeded in conquering it. That he did not overcome it effectually was no fault of his. He had performed what good it lay in his power to perform. He had the divine spirit of charity towards mankind, from whom he was for ever separated.

A strange reflection occurred to me at this point. What should I have done, how should I have acted, if I had been born as Ralph Brabazon had been born? It seemed to me I should have made no struggle; that with the knowledge of my unnatural power, with the wealth at my command that he possessed, I would have made myself the silent and all-powerful scourge of the whole world, revelling in my might, secure in the knowledge that my secret was safe even by its

very incredibility. Pressing my hands to my brow I shut out the hateful reflections which had forced themselves upon me, and prayed God to save me from myself.

And here had I been sitting on judgment over Ralph Brabazon ! It was ridiculous. I would go to him ; assure him of my devotion to his cause. He was in suffering ; my skill, such as it was, should be offered to him. I stepped across the room—there was a firmness in my walk which assured me of quickly returning health—to my writing-table and penned a short note to Mr. Ashcroft, telling him that he could rely upon my secrecy, and that I would call at Redpost House, as soon as I was permitted to go out of doors, for the purpose of attending to Mr. Brabazon's wound.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

THE next day brought a grateful reply from Mr. Ashcroft. Mr. Brabazon was unfortunately much worse ; he was afraid the wound was very serious, that gangrene was setting in.

This was alarming intelligence. I nerved myself for a struggle with Dr. Hallworthy. At first he flatly refused me permission to go out of doors for at least a week ; but I fought my battle with so much energy that he proposed a compromise. It was then Thursday. I might take a short walk on Saturday. He would not, he said, be responsible if I suffered a relapse ; but I was so confident of myself, so buoyed up with the hope of rendering service to the poor fellow, who was, I feared, in mortal danger, and of relieving in some measure Mr. Ashcroft's anxiety, that I was confident in my power to walk to Redpost House without running any serious risk.

Late on Saturday afternoon I left my house, stating my intention of returning within an hour. I took with me some medicines and instruments.

I directed my steps to the gate of Redpost Park, and soon found myself wandering over the path now so well known to me. The sun, a great blinding ball of fire, was sinking slowly behind Redpost Park, and through the tall trees came red glimpses of flame which pained my eyes and blurred my vision.

As I passed the spot where my life had so nearly been sacrificed, where Madame Viacava had paid the great penalty, a brief pang of horror and dread shot through me. With quickening steps I left the scene of deadly peril behind, and was soon standing in the hall of Redpost Park, clasping with a fervent pressure the hand of the old man whose face I could not gaze at now without a feeling of revulsion.

Mr. Brabazon, I learned, was worse. His wound had not at first presented any symptoms of a serious nature. The bullet had not lodged in his wrist, and Mr. Ashcroft had hoped and believed he would have been able, without aid from outside, to bring his master round. But since the night of my adventure in the park Mr. Brabazon's wound had assumed a more dangerous aspect. He had been in great pain, attended with pronounced feverish symptoms. All this I learned as Mr. Ashcroft and I slowly ascended the stairs.

We reached the landing on the third floor, and entered a room which I had not previously been inside of. A lamp—the same lamp which had first sent its light into my study, alarming and horrifying me—stood on a bracket in a corner, and suffused the room with a sickly yellow glow,

Mr. Brabazon lay on a couch in the centre of the apartment. I could scarcely recognise him in the figure which I was now standing over. His cheeks were sunken and livid; his closed eyes seemed to be buried in two great cavities under his brow; his body was fearfully emaciated.

A rapid examination of his wound showed me that mortification had set in, and that the only chance of saving his life was by amputating the arm at once. The mortification was spreading rapidly.

"He is wonderfully patient and gentle," whispered Mr. Ashcroft to me. "Have no fear of him."

The assurance was unnecessary. I had no fear of him—no fear but the one—that death was fast closing in. However, there was the one chance, and there was no time to be lost.

Mr. Brabazon opened his eyes, and a brilliant light illumined them as he recognised me.

"Ah, Doctor Emanuel," he murmured, "is it you? Do you, can you, forgive me? I was mad that night; but you know all now. Will you shake hands with me?"

He put out his left hand, wan and white. I pressed it fervently.

I could not speak for some moments, but he knew at least that I bore him no ill will.

"It is very good of you," he said, retaining my hand.

"Good," I sobbed—I could not for the life of me be calm—"You wrong me bitterly. I am stirred to the very depths

of my soul when I look at you, and hear you ask for my forgiveness—knowing what I know. Do you think my heart is of stone?" I checked the torrent of words which I knew could only injure my patient, and, pressing his hand again warmly, said, "You know we must be calm. A doctor has to close the doors of his heart when duty calls."

"You have made me strangely happy," he murmured, with a wistful smile. "But I see death in your face, Doctor. Do I not?"

"No, no," I replied with eagerness. "You must not think that."

"I do think it," he said; "but do not imagine I fear death. It can only be a grateful release for me. Not only do I live a living death, but the lives of others are in danger while I breathe. It were better I died now."

Mr. Ashcroft was now on his knees at the couch, and was holding between his palms the hand I had relinquished.

"Dear old Ashcroft!" murmured Mr Brabazon, "there is a world where we shall meet without fear."

Delay was dangerous; every moment was precious now.

"Come!" I said, "I must be dictator for a while. You must bear a little pain, and all will be well."

"Pain!" he cried, with a shudder. "I can bear it, but you know what it means—for others. That is my only fear. I have mastered myself of late; but I fear great pain still, not for my own sake, but for the sake of those I love. I know what you mean, Doctor. My arm!"

I nodded.

"It must be, I suppose," he said, sighing profoundly.

It would have been a comparatively simple operation under ordinary circumstances, but with Mr. Brabazon it was almost a question of life and death for him and for us. Anæsthetics I could not administer. I had seen men bear up with marvellous fortitude under similar conditions without the aid of anæsthetics ; but with Mr. Brabazon it was different. Pain, acute physical suffering, meant the outbreak of deadly passion. However, there was no help for it. I made the necessary preparations with as much haste as possible, and Mr. Ashcroft stood over the patient to soothe him, and hold him down. It was a terribly dangerous operation under the circumstances, but other aid we dare not summon.

At the first touch of the knife a hideous yell burst from Mr. Brabazon : he rose in the bed, flinging the old man from him as if he were a feather-weight. I seized him with both arms, and before I could even guess what his object was he wrenched his left arm from my grasp and bit deeply into it.

"It must be either you or me," he cried in agony, as we fell upon him.

Mr. Ashcroft struggled to seize his arm in order to suck the venom from the wound ; but our efforts were of no avail. With the strength of ten men he tossed us from him, and rising from his couch he seized my knife and kept us at bay with the fury of a madman. "What matters my life!" he cried. "You are men : I am but a monster."

We shouted for assistance, but no one answered our frantic calls. The servant who had always answered the hall door for me was out.

I know not how long the fearful struggle—for we did honestly struggle with all our might to seize him—lasted. It was probably about ten minutes, but it may have been much longer or much shorter. At last with a convulsive shudder he fell to the ground.

Fearful of some unlooked-for accident I had brought with me a phial of liquor ammonia, and I injected, hypodermically, a strong dose as soon as Mr. Brabazon fell; but though I repeated the doses I effected no change. He went through the same course as Madame Viacava had gone; and with one wild cry, which sounded in my ears like a pitiful wail to heaven, he passed out of the world.

## CHAPTER XIX.

"THIS, then," said Mr. Ashcroft, sinking into a chair and burying his face in his hands, "is what Doctor Englehorn feared."

Ralph Brabazon's body was now laid out on the couch. I had expected to find the features distorted and unsightly in death; but I found them glorified with a calm and beautiful peace. The expression was that of one who had passed out of the world, not with the agonising wail which had fallen upon my ears, but with a great sigh of relief.

I stood for some time looking down upon the body of the man whose path in life had been different from the path which all other men may tread, who had with his own hand closed upon himself the gates of life, the portals which no man may reopen, and who had opened upon himself the mysterious and awful gates which disclose the paths of eternal happiness or eternal sorrow. Which of these was Ralph Brabazon now treading? I could not regard him as an ordinary suicide. No base or cowardly impulse had caused

him to take his own life : he had sacrificed himself for others' sake. I stooped down and reverently kissed the marble forehead.

I could not help pondering, as I rose to my feet, on my own connection with Redpost House. That I of all others—weak, morbid, retiring, as I had been—should have been singled out by fate as the one to share with Mr. Ashcroft the knowledge of the terrible secret, as the only one to sympathise with him for the shock his affectionate nature had sustained, seemed incomprehensible to me. Bletsoe professed to know the secret too—how much or how little he knew was no concern of mine—but he was one who knew it apart from Mr. Ashcroft and myself, and one whose only desire was to benefit himself at the expense of the dead man. Why had I been selected, I could only ask myself over and over again in vain, to share this dreadful burden ?

After much painful deliberation I found an answer which partly satisfied and wholly humbled me. It was simple enough. It was but the just reward of my own supreme folly, my own culpable weakness. Had I been less wrapt up in myself, had I struggled with my weaker, baser nature, and had I striven determinedly to shake off my whining misanthropy, this terrible chapter in the book of my life would never have been written. Ralph Brabazon would have shunned me as he had shunned the rest of the world ; he would not have been attracted towards me because of my morbidity, and because I was friendless. Perhaps the

tragedy would never have occurred : Madame Viacava would not have dared to traverse the park at night but for my assurance, given in good faith, that I had always found Mr. Brabazon in his room at the hour when she went to meet her death. There was no tenderness in my mind now for the woman who had once bewitched me : her reign in my heart had been strangely short ; but I could not wholly dismiss the idea that I was in some way the cause—the indirect and innocent cause, it is true—of her death.

The chain of my gloomy thoughts was broken suddenly by Mr. Ashcroft. With a weary sigh he rose from his chair, and approaching the couch bent over it and pressed his trembling lips to the cold firm mouth of the man he had loved and suffered for.

I seized his arm gently and led him to the door.

## CHAPTER XX.

WHEN Mr. Ashcroft and I had left the chamber of death behind us and were in silence descending the stairs, the sound of voices reached our ears. To me such sounds conveyed no impression, save that I felt welcome relief at hearing once more the voice of my fellow man ; but it was otherwise with my companion. To him a stranger's speech in that awful house was a tocsin of alarm. He lifted his white bowed head, and in a startled tone he cried, "What is that ? What do I hear ?"

His words, or rather the tone of his voice, at once made me remember it was exceeding strange there should be visitors in Redpost House. My first thought was that our cries for help had been heard by some wanderer in the park, but Mr. Ashcroft shook his head when I suggested this as an explanation. "No," he murmured ; "it cannot be. The park is avoided by every one. To the neighbourhood it is a Sahara—a desert of horrors and mystery. No stranger ventures to wander through it."

We had stopped on the second landing to listen, but the voices below were unintelligible.

"Let us descend," I said, grasping the old man's arm.

"We can soon ascertain who the intruders are."

"Yes, yes," he answered wearily, bowing his head once more. "What can it matter now?"

As we went down the stairs the voices were hushed. The strangers had probably heard our footsteps and were silently awaiting us.

When we reached the first landing we saw that a lamp was alight on a table in the great wide hall; and the draught, which struck chilly upon us, warned us that the hall door stood open.

There were three men in the hall: Mr. Brabazon's servant, who had evidently returned to the house only a few minutes previously, for he was trimming the lamp which had so often lighted me up the staircase, and his hat was still on his head; a young man in a gray tweed suit and a billycock hat; and a powerfully-built man whom I recognised at a glance.

"Anthony Bletsoe!" burst from my lips—the memory of everything connected with the man rushing like a torrent upon me. Had he come here, I asked myself, to seek me out, to revenge himself upon me for the failure of my mission? Or had he come to denounce the man lying up stairs in the calm untroubled majesty of death?

He started as I uttered his name. We were now at the foot of the staircase, and he advanced a few paces to see who

had spoken. His companion in the gray suit had also started at my voice, but he had moved backwards towards the open door.

"Only Mr. Ashcroft and the good Doctor Emanuel," said Bletsoe. "Be not afraid, comrade. The master of the house is, I take it, still confined to his chamber."

Mr. Ashcroft roused himself as Bletsoe spoke, and lifting his head he turned to the servant, and in a firm and angry tone asked, "Who admitted those men?"

The servant stammered a long apology for himself. He had a few minutes previously returned, and as he was in the act of opening the door the two gentlemen came upon him suddenly and demanded admittance. He had, acting upon general orders, denied them admission at first, but learning that one was a gentleman from Scotland Yard he had, through his respect for the law, and the officers thereof, allowed them to enter. Of course he expected instant dismissal: he was prepared for that; but he could not defy the law, or rather the embodiment of the law, in the person of Mr. Snellgrove.

Mr. Snellgrove, a meek-looking man of about thirty years of age, bowed in corroboration of the servant's somewhat laboured statement.

Bletsoe also bowed towards Mr. Ashcroft, and then, turning to me, the spasmodic motion of his mouth disclosing his white, grinning teeth, said, "'Pon my soul and honour, Doctor, I did not expect to find you here. I did not keep

my appointment, as I heard of your illness, and guessed the cause of it. I honour you—'pon my soul I admire you for your pluck, your devotedness to my interests—and, judging by your presence here, for your generosity of spirit. Shall we shake hands? No!" as I drew myself back from him, "Well, be it so; but you are unwise."

"What is your business, sir?" interrupted Mr. Ashcroft angrily.

"My business! Egad, a pertinent question, a very pertinent question. My business, my good sir, lies not with you. The mountain (for which read Ralph Brabazon) would not come to Mohammed (for which read Anthony Bletsoe), so Mohammed comes to the mountain."

"This is no answer, sir. Your business, pray!"

"I have informed you my business lies with your master; our business, I should say," pointing to Snellgrove, "for the practical portion of the matter lies mainly with him. Egad!" he grinned; "Mr. Snellgrove, if you will believe me, is a trifle incredulous on some points known to a select few, and is willing to back his opinion by doing a certain duty unaided. I admire pluck, as my dear friend Doctor Emanuel can tell you, but I deplore rashness. However, Mr. Snellgrove is a gentleman not to be gainsayed."

"Is Mr. Brabazon in the house?" asked Mr. Snellgrove meekly.

"He is, he is," replied Mr. Ashcroft slowly, a heaving motion of the chest agitating him.

"Conduct me to him, please? I hold a warrant for his arrest," said Mr. Snellgrove, abandoning his former meekness of voice and manner, and placing his hand in the breast-pocket of his coat.

"He has been already summoned to a higher and more merciful tribunal than the tribunal of men," said Mr. Ashcroft, lifting his head and glaring defiantly at the gentleman from Scotland Yard.

"Dead! Dead, you mean!" shrieked Bletsoe, clenching his hands and stamping on the floor.

"Dead! You have said it."

There was silence in the dimly-lighted hall for a few moments. I was the first to break the silence.

"Antonio Viacava," I said, unconsciously addressing him by the name which had possessed such terror for me, "I hope, though I fear the hope is a vain one, that your evil heart will be touched when you go up stairs and see your victim. If his death was your object you have succeeded. You are, to my mind, his murderer as much as if you had plunged into his heart the knife you held at my breast."

"Damnation!" he hissed, glaring at me with an intensity of hate in his ordinarily unimpassioned eyes. "You are mad, good Doctor Emanuel. You shall have a strait jacket."

"I think you addressed my friend," said Mr. Snellgrove, pointing to Bletsoe, "as Antonio Viacava."

"He is mad," interrupted the son of Doctor Bletsoe, with undisguised eagerness and terror. "Do not I tell you the

odd doctor is truly mad? His reason has been upset—and no wonder!" he hissed with a sardonic grin.

"Why have you addressed him as Antonio Viacava?" asked Mr. Snellgrove, disregarding Bletsoe's interruption.

"Because," I answered, "he told me he was known abroad by that name. He seemed to take quite a pride in it."

A furious oath came from Bletsoe's lips as I spoke. Mr. Snellgrove turned towards him and said, "Quiet, man! Do you think I don't recognise a madman when I see one?" Then, addressing the servant who was standing near him in open-mouthed bewilderment, Mr. Snellgrove continued, "Will you oblige me by closing the hall door, my man? The draught strikes in bitterly." The servant obeyed in silence, and stood with his back against the door, evidently stupefied.

"Now, Mr. Bletsoe," said Mr. Snellgrove, "things look pretty snug. We shall be better acquainted by and by. When I have satisfied myself that one of my prizes is beyond my reach," pointing upwards with his forefinger, "I will, with your kind permission, Mr. Bletsoe, do myself the pleasure of claiming another and a more valuable prize. Anthony Bletsoe, *alias* Antonio Viacava, will you oblige a friend by permitting him to slip this little bracelet round your wrist?"

The gentleman from Scotland Yard, who had now assumed an air quite theatrical, quickly approached Bletsoe holding in his hand a pair of handcuffs.

With a mad yell Bletsoe darted backwards, and then, glancing swiftly round the hall, he rushed past me up the staircase.

"Stop at once!" said Mr. Snellgrove, "or, so help me, I'll fire!"

Bletsoe stopped suddenly at the threat. He was half-way up the first flight of stairs. He turned slowly and faced us, his mouth twitching rapidly. Mr. Snellgrove stood at the bottom of the stairs holding a revolver in his right hand.

"Bah!" cried Bletsoe. "You would not kill me. You are too clever for that. You would only wound me, and then——" He held his hand close to his neck, and uttering a horrible guttural sound he jerked his thumb upwards. "My father's death! No. Never that. If I had the luck to have carried my revolver with me I should not hesitate. I would shoot you all like rats. But I have only my knife—my knife!" And suddenly drawing from his pocket the surgical knife he had held at my breast on the cliffs, he gazed at it and then at us for one awful moment, and with a yell he buried the glistening blade in his heart.

A moment later his body tumbled down the stairs, and rolled to our feet.

THE END.

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